
The ENVIRONS OF PARIS

L'avenir est aux limonadiers.

—Honoré de Balzac¹

had access to some mystery there, probably of Woman; hence the prostitute was obliged to make herself desirable—to run through the identities in which desire was first encountered by the child. It was a game in which the woman most often collaborated and to an extent was trapped; but there were other forces—market forces, essentially—which threatened to dislodge her from belief in the parts she played. She could be returned quite abruptly to the simple assessment of herself as seller of her own labour power, someone who put physical complaisance on the market and could never be sure what it would fetch. In this sense she belonged to the

I have given my reasons for believing that the ultimate cause of the critics' difficulty with *Olympia* in 1865 was the degree to which she did not take part in the game of prostitution, and the extent to which she indicated the place of that game in class. She came from the lower depths. The images of sickness, death, depravity, and dirt all carried that connotation, but they stayed as passing figures of speech precisely because the critics could not identify what in the picture told them where *Olympia* belonged.

Reduced to its most simple form, this chapter's argument amounts to saying that the sign of class in *Olympia* was nakedness. That may still seem a cryptic formula, so I shall redefine its terms for the last time. Class is a name, I take it, for that complex and determinate place we are given in the social body; it is the name for everything which signifies that a certain history lives us, lends us our individuality. By nakedness I mean those signs—that broken, interminable circuit—which say that we are nowhere but in a body, constructed by it, by the way it incorporates the signs of other people. (Nudity, on the contrary, is a set of signs for the belief that the body is ours, a great generality which we make our own, or leave in

It follows that nakedness is a strong sign of class, a dangerous instance of it. And thus the critics' reaction in 1865 becomes more comprehensible. They were perplexed by the fact that Olympia's class was nowhere but in her body: the cat, the Negress, the orchid, the bunch of flowers, the slippers, the pearl earrings, the choker, the screen, the shawl—they were all lures, they all meant nothing, or nothing in particular. The naked body did without them in the end and did its own narrating. If it could have been seen what signs were used in the process—if they could have been kept apart from the body's whole effect—they might still have been made the critics' property. They would have been turned into objects of play, metaphor, irony, and finally tolerance. Art criticism might have begun.

That the environs of Paris from the 1860s on were recognized to be a special territory in which some aspects of modernity might be detected, at least by those who could stomach the company of the petite bourgeoisie. To use the word "suburban" to describe these stamping grounds—to apply it to resorts like Asnières or Chatou, Bougival, Bois-Colombes, or, pre-eminently, Argenteuil—was on the whole misleading, and remains so. It makes such places out to be the subordinates of some city, whereas in fact they were areas in which the opposite of the urban was being constructed, a way of living and working which in time would come to dominate the late capitalist world, providing as it did the appropriate forms of sociability for the new age. Where industry and recreation were casually established next to each other, in a landscape which assumed only as much form as the juxtaposition of production and distraction (factories and regattas) allowed, there modernity seemed vivid, and painters believed they might invent a new set of descriptions for it.

This chapter mostly looks for such descriptions, which occasionally do surface in modernist painting at this time. There are pictures by Manet and Seurat, for example, in which the environs of Paris are recognized to be a specific form of life: not the countryside, not the city, not a degenerated form of either. But the chapter also tries to explain why such descriptions were rare and for the most part metaphorical, the metaphors being those of dislocation and uncertainty, and the sense of the scene being suggested best by a kind of composition—perfected here—in which everything was left looking edgy, ill-fitting, or otherwise unfinished. These metaphors did not in the event turn out to be a way of storing knowledge: there was to be no sustained or cogent representation of suburbia in the twentieth century. Perhaps that had to do with the peculiar intractability—the foreignness of an unexotic kind—of the classes of people who came to occupy the new terrain. They were the petite bourgeoisie, but also the proletariat.

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and though each despised the other, they both existed, and still exist, at an equal distance from the realm of Art. Painting turned instead to other primitives, whose culture it could patronize more safely.

When painters went out to the countryside round Paris in the 1870s—in search of a landscape, say, or a modern *fête champêtre*—they would have known they were choosing, or accepting, a place it was easy (almost conventional) to find a bit absurd. The tone had been set as early as 1862 by the Goncourts in their journal, describing a day spent by the river at Bougival:

We went to the country with Saint-Victor, like shop assistants. And we said to each other, as we went to look for a train, that really humanity—and all honour to it—is a great Don Quixote at heart. . . .

We took a walk along the Seine at Bougival. In the long grass on the island people were reading aloud from *Le Figaro*. On the water, boaters in red jerseys sang songs by Nadaud. Saint-Victor came across an acquaintance of his among the willows; it was some stockjobber or other. Finally we found a corner where there was no landscape painter sitting at his easel and no slice of melon left behind. . . .²

The terms that seem to me crucial in the Goncourts' entry are the first and last—the shop assistants and the landscape painter. It is they that dictate the Goncourts' peculiar tone—the comprehensive, slightly hectic irony that has to be applied, apparently, to every item of the scene. For now else could one deal—this is the text's essential burden—with the people now laying claim to landscape, painted or not; with their wish or pretence to be "by themselves," and with oneself as sharing that wish; or with those others who dispensed with the illusion of solitude and simply regarded the riverbank as backdrop for the songs they always sang, the same newspapers, the same slices of melon? And the great river itself, after these people were done with it!

The manner and imagery of this passage were much reproduced in the next twenty years or so, and frequently to great effect. It very often seemed that describing this landscape at all, in any detail, depended on finding it false—though false by what standard was never made clear. There was precious little clarity, we shall discover, in any of the writers' opinions in this area. They were in a cleft stick about the countryside, and trying for irony at their own indecision. They were part of the crowd at Bougival and Asnières, and almost willing to admit as much. In a sense they relished their fellow Parisians, or at least were ill-equipped to do without them;

but they could not help wishing, at the same time, that the crowd would behave differently, put away *Le Figaro* and pick up the leftovers from the *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*.

Sometimes the sequence of their emotions was quite explicit in the text. Here, for example, is a writer called "Y" in *La Vie Parisienne*, beginning an essay entitled "Un Dimanche d'été":

I had been in the countryside for a week, and I was bored, tired of the silence, when at last the village bells announced the morning of the seventh day, the day of rest and rejoicing. And soon a shudder went through the woods, and the hills echoed with the sound of the day's first pun.

—The Parisians are coming! I cried out in delight. Nature will leave off its role of mute and mysterious nymph, and become a barmaid to whom commercial travellers somewhat brutally pay court.

Hour by hour the invasion mounted, taking possession of the countryside as of a vast *guinguette*, a café-concert even larger than those on the Champs-Elysées. These people came to handle the hillsides as if they were breasts, to look up the skirts of the forests, and disarrange the river's costume.

The breeze began to murmur jokes and catcalls. The smell of fried fish and fricassee of rabbit rose in the air along the riverbanks and wafted across the fields. A concert of popping corks began, of knives clinking against glasses, and dirty songs; and it went on till nightfall, getting louder all the time. . . . When I had seen the countryside given over to those who alone understand and know how to enjoy it, when I had had my fill of the spectacle, I took the train and went back to Paris. . . .³

If any one thing was to blame for this state of affairs, it was the railway on which "Y" made his final escape. The lines laid down since 1850, especially those to the west of the city, had quite abruptly rendered the countryside available to Paris, as part of a weekend or even a work day. These facts became common knowledge in the 1860s and soon affected the critics' sense of how landscape painting was to be construed. The novelist Robert Caze, for example, writing a *Salon* in 1885 and turning to a picture by Jacques-Emile Blanche—it seems to have had a lady sitting on a lawn as its central feature—was in no doubt as to what modern landscape amounted to:

Oh! the poor little Parisienne, bewildered and bewildering in the midst of this imitation nature—the nature of Sèvres and Ville d'Avray. We should be grateful to Monsieur Blanche for having seen so well the odious turf of these villas *entre murs*, these lawns brought in from England on the Dover or Southampton boat, arriving each morning on the fish train. And look at the landscape in which this pasty-faced model tries to take her ease! I dare say there's a globe of silvered glass round the corner, and a little fountain pissing its monotonous song into a basin with three goldfish in it! And here is the bourgeois—the proprietor!—bringing



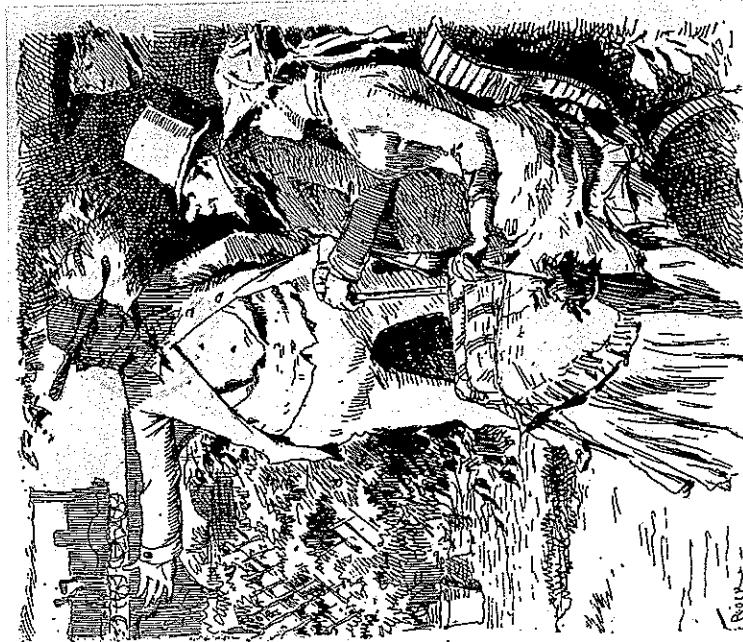
54. Gustave Doré, *Les Plaisirs champêtres du parc du Vésinet*. Engraving from Labédolière's *Histoire des environs du Nouveau Paris*, 1861.

in a bunch of flowers bought on the asphalt at the Madeleine after the stock exchange closed . . . bringing them back to his home in *the country*. Doubtless it is excellent to give us the sensation, or, rather, the smell, of Asnières and Bois-Colombes, without obliging us to take the tramway. If I were one for economies, I would buy Monsieur Blanche's *Pivoines* and be saved the trouble of visiting this landscape of boating parties and the humorous public of Sundays, these fields full of pianos and hunting horns, of factory chimneys and the perfume of manure.⁴

It was the railway that had made this landscape. It carried the bourgeois back from the Madeleine at five, it ushered in the shop assistants and commercial travellers, the blue songs and the globes of silvered glass. It stood intrusive guard over the pleasures of Gustave Doré's picnickers in the *Parc du Vésinet*, and was pointed out by one bourgeois to another in a cartoon by Trock:

—Really, living in Paris, on the Place de l'Europe, had become unbearable! . . . Nothing but the noise of the Western Railway all day . . .
—And here, how do you entertain yourselves?
—We watch the trains go by.

55. Trock, "Habiter Paris, place de l'Europe." Wood engraving in *La Caricature*, vol. 1 (1882).



— Habiter Paris, place de l'Europe, ça n'était plus terrible... Pas d'autre vue que le vu et vient du chemin de fer de l'Ouest.
— Eh bien, quelle distraction avez-vous?
— Nous regardons passer les trains.

Well might the "witty and benevolent" Monsieur Coindard, secretary of the same Western Railway, declare with satisfaction: "Les lignes de banlieue, c'est notre boulevard intérieur."⁵ For he more than anyone stood to gain from the fact that Paris's outlines were changing; the city henceforward would have more than one thoroughfare, more than one scale, and no firm bounding lines between its various edges and interiors.

It was partly this last uncertainty that so provoked the critics of the Parisian countryside, and had them lay on the irony with a trowel. The environs of Paris, they said, were neither town nor country any more. Worse than that, these places failed to offer a visible—or even a symbolic—transition between one form of social existence and another, as the land outside the *barrière* had done for Hugo's philosophic stroller. At Sèvres or Le Vésinet, for example, there was nothing to be seen but countryside; it



56. Troc, Ces Bons Parisiens. Wood engraving in *La Caricature*, vol. 1 (1882).

might be thick with the signs of Paris at the end of the line—with restaurants, watermelons, smoke from factory chimneys—but Paris itself had still not arrived. These were landscapes arranged for urban use, but part of their utility was the fiction, flimsy as it was, that city and citizens were far away.

The ironic commentator wished to make it clear that he for one was not deceived. There was no nature, he believed, where there were Parisians. The very sky over Bougival was pale and unhealthy, “the colour of a Parisienne’s skin.”⁵⁶ The dust at Chatou was compounded with rice powder, and “wherever there was a wretched square of grass with half a dozen rachitic trees, there the proprietor made haste to establish a ball or a café-restaurant.”⁵⁸

No doubt the illusion was often perfunctory, but by and large it worked. The stockjobbers and landscape painters were in no doubt they had left the city behind. As they sat on the grass by the river, in another cartoon

by Troc, their father opened his arms and said: “Ah! my children, how good it is to find a little solitude on Sundays!” For this was the way they wanted nature to be; this was the way it essentially *was*—a kind of demi-Paris whose trees were like those on the boulevards, and whose restaurants resembled the best in the Rue Montmartre.⁵⁹ Should not a village be equipped, to count as a village at all, with “sellers of *coco* and amusements, games of macaroon, shooting galleries, swings, and a motley crowd of people, swarming and rowdy, all using Parisian argot, and studded with *modistes*, drapers’ assistants, students, and reporters”?⁶⁰

It was possible, of course, for the illusion to be too threadbare and simply misfire. Monsieur Bartavel, for example, the amiable hero of an *opéra-bouffe* from 1875 entitled *Les Environs de Paris*, did not enjoy his trip to the suburbs. His top hat was crushed in a winepress at Argenteuil, he lost his companions, he was not impressed by the sights at Robinson and Montmorency. This is his verdict in the play’s last act:

BARTAVEL—Yes, my friend . . . apart from that everything has really been . . . disagreeable! . . . And behold before you a man who is completely disillusioned with the Environs of Paris!

JOSEPH—Why is that? . . .

BARTAVEL, standing up—Why is that? . . . Because I had a picture of the place which bore not the slightest resemblance to what I saw. When I set off I said to myself: And there, I shall have some air, some sun and greenery! . . . Oh, yes, greenery! Instead of cornflowers and poppies, great prairies covered with old clothes and detachable collars . . . laundresses everywhere and not a single shepherdess . . . factories instead of cottages . . . too much sun . . . no shade . . . and to cap it all, great red brick chimneys giving out black smoke which poisons the lungs and makes you cough! . . . Coach drivers who jeer at you, restaurateurs who take you for all they can get . . . winepresses that flatten your hat . . . vinegrowers who spill white wine all over you . . . forests where you lose your daughter . . . hotels where you mislay your son-in-law! . . . And that, my dear Joseph . . . that is the faithful description of what are customarily called . . . the Environs of Paris! . . .⁶¹

There is a quality in these texts which may strike us now as little short of desperate. The writers are so anxious to outflank all the attitudes towards landscape they are describing, and they never explain what other attitudes they take to be less silly. They are all bourgeois, whereas *my* irony is not; that seems to be the writers’ message, essentially, and the main reassurance they mean to offer their readers. Bartavel’s disillusion may be safely comic, but his inventory of faults and blemishes would not inspire much disagreement in any of the writers quoted so far. For was it not true that the

landscape consisted of rachitic trees and factory chimneys—or consisted too much of them? And which was more absurd, the good bourgeois who gave his blessing to the signs of industry in nature, or his partner who claimed not to notice them? "Come a little farther this way," says another Parisian, in *Le Nain Jaune*, showing off his weekend villa to a guest:

You'll see a most delightful view. . . . Isn't it charming? . . . And you can make out part of the panorama from my house. . . . How do you find it? —I don't see anything very extraordinary . . . apart from those great chimneys and their black smoke, which for me rather spoil the landscape. . . .

—For me it's an added charm. . . . My dear fellow! It is industry which comes to add its note. . . . But here we are at the house. . . . Watch out for the puddle. . . . It never dries out, even in the height of summer. . . .¹²

There was clearly some discord in the landscape, something which prevented nature from being seen in the proper way. It had to do with a fact as large as bourgeois society itself: not just the signs of its industry, but other bourgeois, too many of them, pretending not to be industrious. These were the people Bernadille described in an 1878 article entitled "*Le Dimanche à Paris*":

On that day a whole new population takes possession of Paris, of its spectacles, its cafés, its promenades, its public gardens, its boulevards, its Palais-Royal, its railway stations, its *boulevards*. During the week, you could no doubt have seen them, mixed in with the ordinary public, but as it were effaced by it. Now they show themselves off in their pure state; they flood through the streets, they spread over Paris and overflow. The great city belongs to them all day long. Where do they come from? From behind the counters of humble shops and offices, from businesses and government departments. This is not precisely a "popular" public in the full force of that word, for the people of *L'Asommoir* celebrate Monday in preference to Sunday; it is a public of petits bourgeois, of small tradesmen, mixed up with real workers.¹³

Once a week, in other words, there was an excess of bourgeoisie in the spaces Hausmann had provided: it was this that upset the commentators and elicited their scorn. The excess was comprised of shop assistants and commercial travellers, readers of *Le Figaro*, clerks in detachable collars, the spawn of banks and bureaucracies—the new men.

These people's access to the public realm was a phenomenon of the 1870s, and much remarked on at the time. Politicians were fond of regarding them as a force to be reckoned with, and never tired of harking back to the radical leader Léon Gambetta's great verdict on the new republic—that it owed its existence to a great mass of men who had previously been excluded from the state, and would henceforth have to draw its strength directly from the "nouvelles couches sociales."¹⁴ Those last

three words were usefully vague, but what they pointed to essentially was a shift of power *within* the wider middle class. The regime of landowners and *notables*—those men whose influence at a local level had survived all previous changes in the form of government—was finally coming to an end; and in its place was a congeries of shopkeepers and small builders, schoolteachers and civil servants, "the party of pharmacists and vets."¹⁵ Somewhere at the edge of that party—wanting a place in it, not sure of how to insist on one—was the odd new animal, the petit bourgeois. The texts I have been quoting are ironical at the petit bourgeois's expense. What was held to be the most comical thing about him was his unpreparedness for the leisure he now enjoyed; he was a workaday creature, after all, who naturally clung to the society of his fellows and had need of fried food and regattas. He was naïve and tasteless; easily elated and easily duped; and he too mourned his own enfranchisement—there was always a time before trippers and tourists, when the spot was unspoilt and there wasn't a soul on the beach.

But it seems to me that more is at stake in the writers' irony than this. What they seem to find laughable in the "nouvelles couches sociales" is their *claim* to pleasure, the degree to which they asserted a right at all to solitude, to nature, to spontaneity. Various descriptions were offered of the absurdities that resulted, but these hardly account for the writers' acrid tone: they seem to be reasons, on the contrary, for finding the subject harmless and the claims quixotic. But the subject was not treated lightly; or, rather, the lightness was repeatedly tinged with a kind of hysterical loftiness. No doubt these people did not get what they asked for, and had only the faintest notion of what it would have been like to have had it. Yet the claim was enough; the claim was the threat, because it was their way of claiming to be part of the bourgeoisie.

There was a struggle being waged in these decades for the right to bourgeois identity. It was fought out quite largely in the forms the new city had brought to perfection: the squares, the streets, and the spectacles. The crowds on the riverbank on Sunday afternoon, all moving about in identical dresses, all eager to be seen, were engaged in a grand redefinition of what counted as middle-class. And the redefinition was resisted: Gambetta, after all, was out of step with the general run of his class in the 1870s, and well aware that his slogans would be found provoking. One means of resistance was irony, and the ironists' message amounted to this: that the claim to pleasure was nothing if not an attempt to have access to Nature; that these people knew nothing but Paris, and took Paris with them wherever they went; that that was the key to their vulgarity—and because they were vulgar, they could never be bourgeois.

To call someone vulgar is to say he insists on a status which is not yet proved or well understood by him, not yet possessed as a matter of form. It is a damaging charge, made by one bourgeois against another. To have access to Nature be the test of class is to shift the argument to usefully irrefutable ground; the bourgeoisie's Nature is not unlike the aristocracy's Blood: what the false bourgeois has is false nature, nature *en toc*, *la nature des environs de Paris*; and beyond or behind it there must be a real one, which remains in the hands of the real bourgeoisie.

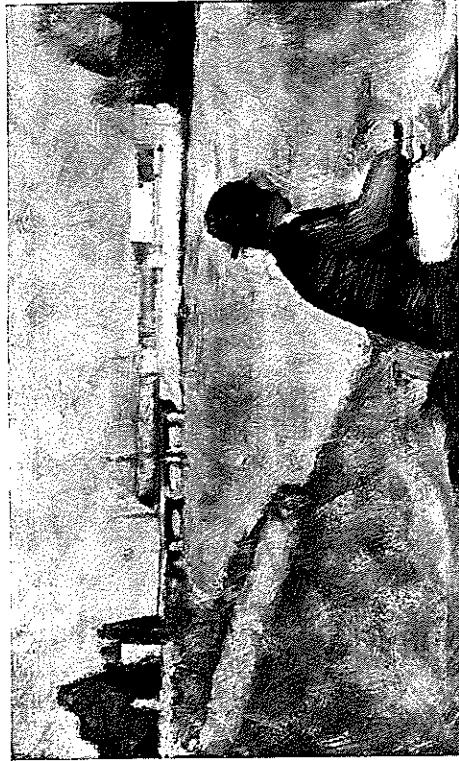
Cohue hebdomadaire à travers les banlieues!
Parisiens! cherchant des fleurs sur les prairies!
Ils se figurent être à des milliers de lieues . . .
*Parce qu'il est dimanche, et qu'ils se sont lavés.*¹⁶

The reader could rest assured: the flowers in this landscape would wilt before evening, and the crowd would return to its counters and offices.

57. Jean-François Raffaëlli, *Promeneurs du dimanche*. From *Les Types de Paris*, 1889.



58. Georges Seurat, *Personnage assis, étude pour Une Baignade à Asnières* (known as *Banks of the Seine at Suresnes*), 1883.



One of the great subjects of Impressionist painting was the landscape I have just been describing, and therefore it does not seem unreasonable to ask how far the painters' attitudes towards it resembled those of the journalists and poets. In particular we might want to know how they dealt with the signs that this landscape belonged to Paris—the traces of industry “adding its note” and the presence in nature of the “nouvelles couches sociales.” There are certainly pictures where these are the characters round which the landscape is organized, and where the painter appears concerned to establish some kind of comic connection between them. Sometimes the comedy seems to me essentially the same as Trock’s or Bartavel’s, and at others it strikes a muted, almost respectful note, which is not quite ironical, at any rate not supercilious or unkind.

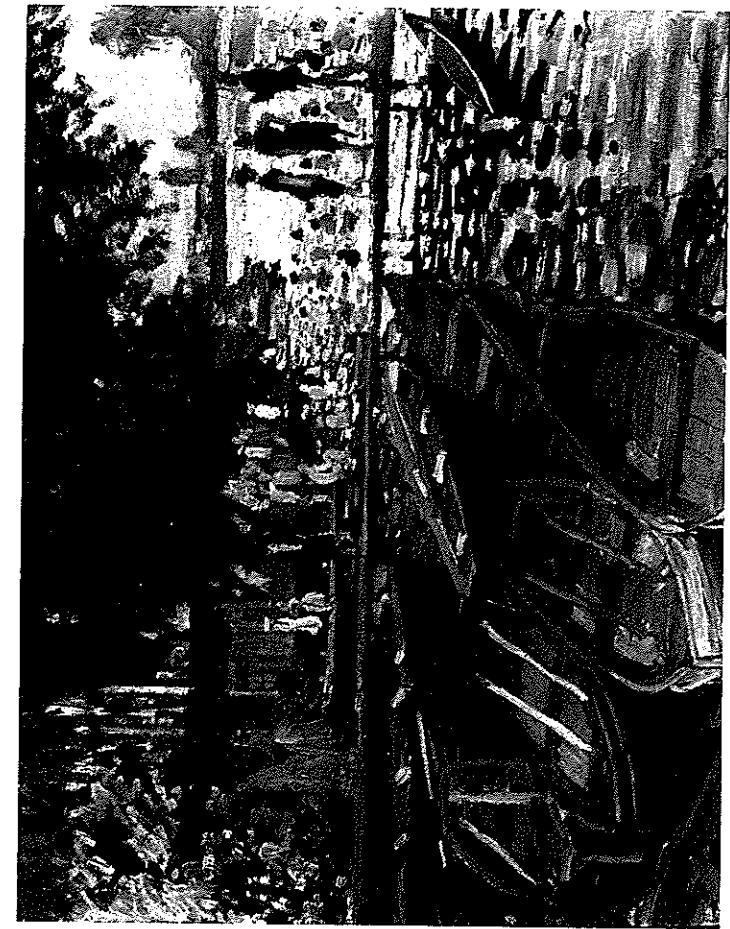
Compare, for example, Raffaëlli’s depiction of middle-class pleasure in his *Promeneurs du dimanche* with that of Seurat in the study for his *Baignade à Asnières*. There is no mistaking the coexistence of landscape, figure, and factory in both, or the fact that each one of the terms puts its neighbours in doubt. But the one picture surely invites its viewers to recognize the easy contradiction and laugh (not too maliciously; this is Bartavel’s comedy, not Robert Caze’s); while the other seems still to be feeling for a way to characterize the same situation—as if the painter were not sure that it had taken on a character at all as yet. (It matters here that Raffaëlli’s individuals

59. Claude Monet, *Le Train dans la campagne*, c. 1870.

are so much more securely established as middle-class than Seurat's. There is a difference in kind between the solitary, slightly overdone respectability of Seurat's figure—his bowler hat immovable against the sun—and that of Raffaëlli's patriarch.) Compare, in the same manner, Doré's *Plaisirs champêtres* (p. 150) with those portrayed in Monet's *Train dans la campagne* from 1870.

At this point an unsympathetic reader—one finding the victory of Seurat and Monet over Doré and Raffaëlli a trifle easy—might respond in the following way. Very well, she might say, I'm prepared to accept that the irony here is easy and condescending; but surely irony of any kind is preferable in such cases to outright complaisance? And is not Monet's picture merely accepting—of more or less anything, if seen in a good light? Do not such images put us back with the happy landscape painter at Bougival, sitting at his easel next to the melon segments? The objector might bring on hereabouts some depictions of Bougival by Monet or Sisley or Pissarro as circumstantial evidence. Isn't there a point, she might continue, at which we *know* that what we are dealing with is straightforward bad faith? Wouldn't we agree that some such phrase applies to Jean-Charles Cazin's *La Marne*, for example—to its saccharine version of modern life?

60. Alfred Sisley, *La Seine à Bougival*, 1873.61. Jean-Charles Cazin, *La Marne*, 1882.

62. Claude Monet, *La Grenouillère*, 1866.

And what is the difference, in terms of meaning, between Cazin's countryside and Monet's? The unsympathetic reader at least asks the right questions. It is presumably one thing to avoid irony and another to attain to blankness, and often in modernist painting it is not clear which description is the appropriate one. But let us put the same questions in a less aggressive form. Let us ask, for example, how Monet's depiction of the river bathing place called La Grenouillère might possibly stand in relation to an image of the same place taken from the weekly magazines—like the one I show by Jules Pelcoq (accepting straightforwardly that there is no question here of imitation or influence of a direct kind)? To what extent does Monet's oil painting borrow its vitality from the illustration, or is its purpose somehow to contradict such a quality, or at least its generalizing force? The painting's composure, and the cool way it savours certain (rather simple) formal rhythms, in the pattern of boats or the punctuation of figures on the straight

pontoon—are these meant, so to speak, as refutations of Pelcoq, as so many signs of the painter's way with things as opposed to the illustrator's? Does painting get done in spite of illustration—is that the proposal? Get done in spite of modernity, even, or because modernity does not amount to much? But then, why go to La Grenouillère in the first place? In search of the insignificant—is that it?

During the summer of 1875 Berthe Morisot did a number of paintings on the plain of Gennevilliers, a few miles east of Argenteuil. One of them, entitled *Un Pêcher de blanchisseuses*, she chose to show the next year in the second Impressionist exhibition.¹⁷ Is it in order for us to read her depiction of landscape with, say, Bartravé's monologue in mind? They are all there, the motifs of his disappointment: the laundresses instead of shepherdesses, the new villa, the horizon of chimneys and smoke. But are these the motifs that matter here? Does it affect our reading of the idyll to know that the very fields at Gennevilliers were irrigated with water from the great collector sewer, and that the local press resounded with rumours of bad-smelling eggplants and poisoned soil?¹⁸

Consider Jean Ajalbert's description—he is the poet whose lines on the weekend crowd in the *banlieue* I just quoted—in a poem entitled “Gennevilliers.” It was part of a collection called *Sur le vif* published in 1886, with the subtitle *Vers impressionnistes*:

*Le soleil s'est lasé d'éclairer ce ciel, gris
De la fumée opaque aux fatigues des fabriques,
Qui bornent l'horizon du côté de Paris.*



63. Jules Pelcoq, *A la Grenouillère*. Wood engraving in *Le Journal Amusant*, no. 991 (1873).

Un Edouard Manet a montré dans une œuvre confirmant l'idée qu'il ne fait pas de peintre à part.



64. Berthe Morisot, *Vers Argenteuil, pays des moulins minuscules*,
c. 1875.



64. Berthe Morisot, *Les Gennévilliers, plaine de blanchisseuses* (known as *Un Percher de blanchisseuses*), 1875.

Vers Argenteuil, pays des moulins minuscules,

S'étagent des carriés de maigres échafas

Condamnés, sous le poids d'éternels crépuscules,

A fournir les marchés d'acides chasselas.

Les récoltes ont là d'impossibles générées;

Les paysans sont plutôt des égoutiers,

Arrachant, par l'engraïs, des légumes obèses

D'un sol à qui la Lune a caché ses quartiers,

Et pour qui le soleil n'a pas eu de lumière.

Sur les maisons, des toits de tuiles "vermillon" . . .

C'est la campagne, mais sans chaume et sans chaumière,

Sous la monstre aboieuse ou le monstre grillois. . . .¹⁹

How much should it matter to us, this description? Or should we, rather, put our trust in the good humour of Morisot's husband, writing to her in 1882:

I have come from the plain of Gennévilliers, which I went across on my way from Epinay. Everything is in blossom there and has the smell of spring. The plain looked pretty in every direction.²⁰

The *Percher de blanchisseuses* does not seem quite so straightforwardly delighted with the landscape as this. The view it presents is not exactly "pretty in every direction," but it is not grim and lugubrious either. Morisot's peasants—they do occasionally appear in her pictures, standing in

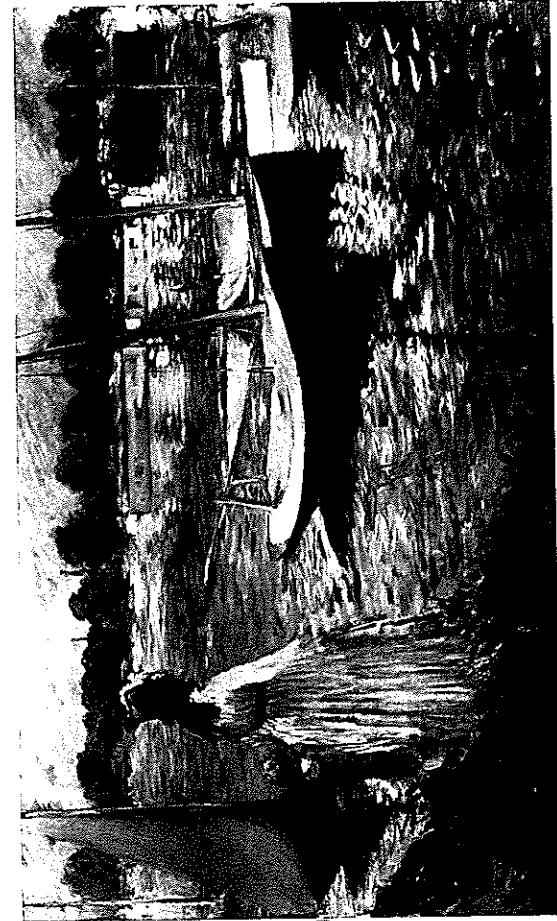
65. Berthe Morisot, *Dans les blés*, 1875.

front of the waving grain—are not like Ajalbert's "égoutiers." The sun evidently persists in illuminating the crude tiles on the weekend *batissements*; the crudity and even the encroaching grey are given a place in the landscape and even some kind of weight; modernity is not overlooked, but the painter does not seem to find it in the least melancholy, or believe it should change her bright, bucolic handling of the things in front of her—those scraps of linen on the fence, that crisscross of lines and figures against the grass.

And where—final question—are the lumpish boys supposed to be bathing in Seurat's *Baignade à Amiéres* (Plate XIII)? In what kind of landscape, in what kind of water? Opposite the mouth of the same *grand égout collecteur*, in fact; and this at a time—in the hot summers of the 1880s—when

more than 120,000 cubic meters of solids have accumulated at the collector's mouth; several hundred square meters are covered with a bizarre vegetation, which gives off a disgusting smell. In the current heatwave, the town of Clichy [it is there in the background of Seurat's picture, its line of factories blocking the river] possesses a veritable Pontine Marshes of its own.²¹

Pictures are being whisked in and out of the reader's field of vision, and questions multiplied, mainly because I do not have any very clear answers to most of them. Perhaps it would help if we focussed on one picture, not

66. Edouard Manet, *Les Bords de la Seine à Argenteuil, 1874.*

noticeably less cryptic than the rest, Manet's *Argenteuil, les canotiers*, from 1874 (Plate XI); for here, I believe, the main elements of the matter are assembled: the middle class and its pleasures, the countryside organized to attend to them, and the answering presence of industry. This is the picture, it seems to me, in which the most literal effort was made to put such things in order and insist they belonged together.

It is important that the picture is big. It is a picture for the salon; a dominating image, four feet wide and nearly five feet high, whose message was meant to carry across a crowded room. And the first impression, as so often with Manet, is of a great, flat clarity of form—clearness of edge, and plain abbreviation of surface within those edges. Of course the viewer soon sees that these qualities coexist with others: with an extraordinary, calculated fat richness of touch, a thick weave of individual brushstrokes, dab after dab in the woman's dress or the flowers she holds, in the distant boats or the great blue surface of water. The eye gets involved in the details: it makes out the fingers half lost in the flowers, or the stuff of the folded parasol on either side of the yachtsman's arm. But detail plays against plainness; an exuberant tissue of touches, worked over and into one another, mixed and remixed, hard-edged and soft-edged, and all of them quite safely contained in the end, made part of an order that is simplified and flat.

The examples are obvious. The man, for instance, is seemingly turned towards his inscrutable companion, no doubt in admiration; his body is swivelled in space, half leaning back from the picture's surface. And that obliqueness is half offered to the viewer and half refused: the tunic and torso are kept in touch with the surface, flattened out—by the curious line of light which runs from the neckline diagonally across the open chest; by the narrow, flat rainbow curve of lines on the man's far shoulder; by the ruck of brushmarks where the tunic puckers; and by the shadowy flatness of the man's forearm, lined up as it is against the picture surface and touched with a couple of unattached, absolute dabs of colour where the light outlines a knuckle and finger on the fist.

The picture offers these irresolutions to us: the flattened body; the mast which never quite manages to be modelled; the dense, opaque blue of the water and the floating, tilted, improbable woman's hat (Plate XII). The hat, I suppose, is the strongest sign of flatness in the picture. It is a black straw oval, hardly seeming to belong to the head underneath it. It is a simple surface; and onto the surface is spread that wild twist of tulle, piped onto the oval like cream on a cake, smeared on like a great flourishing brushmark, blown up to impossible size. It is a great metaphor, that tulle; and it is, yes, a metaphor of paint and painting. One of the things that the

ornament does is put in doubt the picture's already fragile space; for it laps like a wave against the far white wall, the one across the river in front of the houses.

These are the things which are always said about Manet's painting; in his lifetime querulously, and later by critics and historians who were certain that here—in the oddities and flourishes—lay the point of the picture and the key to its classic appeal. They were not wholly wrong, it seems to me; but it has to be said—I shall say it again and again, later, meaning it metaphorically—that Manet found flatness more than invented it; he saw it around him in the world he knew. I mean that literally here. If we look at one of the other pictures Manet did in Argenteuil, we can see, from the back, the unlikely construction of the black straw hat. For hats themselves were two-dimensional in 1874; they were tilted forward and tied up behind, real pieces of fashionable machinery. (That fact makes sense, incidentally, of a tiny fleck of black which can be seen, in *Argenteuil, les canotiers*, at the upper edge of the woman's ear: it must be the tip of the hidden bow, the clue to the whole outlandish construction.)

Nevertheless the later enthusiasts were right to single out the things they did. The more we look at the picture the more we come to dwell on its peculiarities, and see it as flaunting the facts of its own discrepancy.

Signs, things, shapes, and modes of handling do not fit together here. Paint does not make continuities or engineer transitions for the eye; it enforces distinctions and disparities, changing completely across an edge, insisting on the stiffness of a pose or the bluntness of blue against yellow. This is the picture's overall language—this awkwardness of intersection, this dissonance of colour. But once again the viewer is afforded a few special instances of the general lack of fit. For example, the hank of rope which hangs over the orange side of the boat towards the right. No doubt we decipher the flecked rope and the fluffy tassel without too much difficulty, and proceed to examine the more elusive trail of paint which starts down from the gunwale, bends, and seems to peter out into the orange— peter out for no good reason. And in due course the eye makes sense of the situation: we begin to see the wandering line as a shadow, and realize eventually that the orange surface is not—as it is first assumed to be—simply flat. It is curved, it is concave; and the curve explains the peculiar shadow and is explained by it—or, rather, is half explained and half explaining: the broken triangle of brushstrokes is not mended quite so easily, and never entirely proves the illusion it plays with. It stays painted, it stays on the edge of a likeness.

And what are we supposed to make, finally, of the visual rhyme which Manet puts at the picture's centre? In between the figures, outlined against the sky, is a distant factory chimney. Beneath it a reflection spreads out across the water, grey and white at first, opening slowly into the ripples of the river, then reappearing farther down, dispersed a bit more and touched with yellow, before the water surface finally breaks up. Now in fact these marks are *not* a reflection. They are a line-up of false equivalents—two pieces of rope hanging down from the end of a furled-up sail, and four tiny yellow flowers straggling free from a band on the woman's hat brim. They are a kind of joke—the word comes awkwardly, but I cannot think of a better one—about false equivalence; about things appearing to connect and then being seen not to; about illusion, about the difference between illusion and untruth. These are the picture's main concerns, of course; and in general it is far from playful in its treatment of them.

It has the look of an icon, this picture, does it not?—an altarpiece with two great meek figures presented to us, dominant, the one half turning to the other, yielding, indicating, paying some kind of homage. And both of them closed in an arbour of boats, sitting on a plain horizontal throne, hemmed in by a patient system of straight lines—masts and chimneys, riverbank and far white wall. Yet it is no icon: it is too casual, too uncomposed, too untidy. The river is full of the signs of *canotage*: rigging

and bits of boats and rolled-up canvas, the whole thing patchy and provisional. It is the lack of order which must have been striking in 1875, for here was a subject which lent itself normally to simple rhythms and sharp effects: sails bending in unison, rigging arranged in casual geometries, reflections laid out as counterpoint to the world above. Manet's regatta was not like this: there was no single sail unfurled, and the whole of a boat was never shown. *Canotage* was a litter of ropes and masts and pennants, its cashnness confirmed by the invading slab of blue which so perplexed the critics. The blue was the foil for this patchwork, this debris; it was the consistency of nature, they might have said, as opposed to the random signs of manufacture; it was what survived of landscape.

So what can we say of the objects and persons at Argenteuil? How are people depicted here, how do they present themselves, what kind of in-

67. Claude Monet, *Canotiers à Argenteuil*, c. 1874.



individuals are they? It would be nice to be as sure of the answer as the English critic in 1876 who called Manet's subject "these vulgar figures," this "couple of very ordinary-looking lovers sitting on the gunwale of a boat."²² Or, as certain as Maurice Chaumelin, writing a year earlier in *Le Bien Public*:

Under the pretext of representing nature and society just as they present themselves, the realists dispense with balance in their pictures of both. But let that pass. There are at least, in this nature and this society, aspects which are more agreeable than others, and types which are more attractive. Monsieur Manet is deliberately out to choose the flattest sites, the grossest types. He shows us a butcher's boy, with ruddy arms and pug nose, out boating on a river of indigo, and turning with the air of an amorous marine towards a trollop seated by his side, decked out in horrible finery, and looking horribly sullen.²³

We may prefer, however, the admission of uncertainty in Baron Shop's entry on the picture in *Le Petit National*:

His *Canotiers d'Argenteuil* are two, one of them a lady. They are shown full face, sitting on a bench together, with the air of being tolerably bored, as far as the

"L'air passablement ennuyé autant que permettent d'en juger les em-
pôtements volontaires des figures"—at least this critic seems aware of the
problem. The previous writers, one cannot help feeling, were wishing
expressions and simplicities where the paint allowed them none. They were
wanting the signs, the largely absent signs, of social inferiority: they would
have their butcher's boy and brave "donzelle," they would have vulgarity
and grossness; anything rather than the actual disguise they were offered,
the deadpan, the uncertainty.

The people in the picture are *posing*, perhaps we could put it that way—choosing not as artists' models do, but as people might for a photograph, as they might have done later in just such a place. Their faces go blank, their bodies turn awkward, they forget how to look happy or even serious. The woman's face, especially, is worked and reworked to the point of effacement; it is scarred and shadowed and abbreviated, hairless and doll-like, inanimate but opaque. The eyes look out levelly from underneath the hat orim, the mouth just opens, the earrings and necklace are neat as a pin. The woman resists the critics' descriptions: she is not quite vulgar, not quite "ennuyé," not quite even sullen.

This is a picture of pleasure, remember, of people taking their ease. We need a word to express their lack of assurance in doing so; or at least the curious, complex *qualification* of pleasure as these people seem to have it. Veblen talks of individuals—he has in mind considerably wealthier women than the one we are looking at—“performing” leisure, or “rendering” it.³⁵



⁶⁸ Hadel *Le Salon comique*. Wood engraving in *L'Eclipse*, 30 May 1875.

The verbs are useful but a bit too strident. "Joylessness" would almost do—it has the advantage of defining the matter in negative terms—but in practice the word has lost its limitations, and has too pejorative a ring. The best phrase, I believe, occurs in Norbert Elias's writings: he talks of the places allowed for excitement in our society—he thinks they are rather few—and points to "the cover of restraints" which spreads, more and more evenly, over action and affect in modern times.²⁶ The "cover of restraints" in the place of pleasure—that seems to me the great subject of Manet's art. But it should be said at once, by way of proviso, that in Manet's art the restraints are visible: they are not yet embedded in behavior; they still have the look of something made up or put on. Of course there is *fashion* already, and that is the strongest sign of the order to come; but it is important that fashions are still assumed a bit awkwardly and seem not to belong to their wearers. (Is that what Chaumelin meant by calling the woman "horriblement favorite"??)

The part of the picture that has so far been left out of discussion is the landscape in the background. On the other side of the river is a town or village—anyway, some kind of built-up area—in which the viewer can quite easily make out a mansarded villa, trees and houses, a white wall, and some factory chimneys—two of them idle, one producing smoke. These details were noticed in 1875. The cartoonist in *L'Eclipse*, Hadol, imagined the man's (now phallic) hat floating in the Seine beside its flowery partner, in front of a building labelled "Fabrique d'Indigo." He added the caption,

"The Seine at the Sewer of Saint-Denis." And thus the blue of the river was explained—by the great chemical-dye factories a few miles upstream from Argenteuil, pouring their indigo waste into the water.²⁷

It is a pedestrian joke, of course, but its materials seem to me the right ones. The cartoonist's mistake, if I can put it this way, is to picture the landscape as literally *made by* industry, and therefore have the factories to



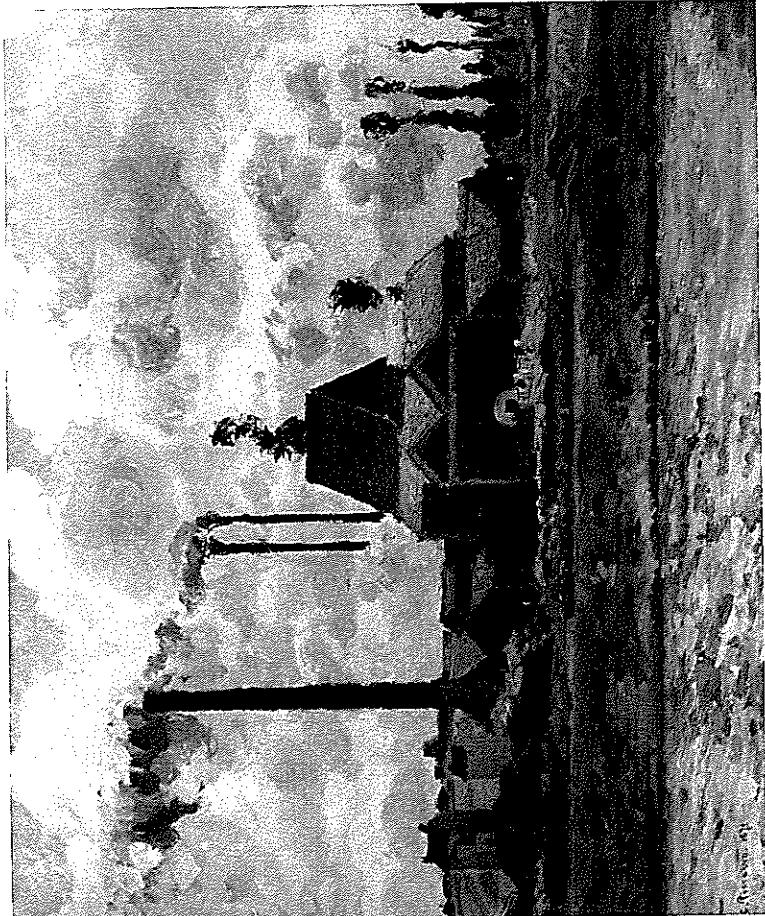
69. Claude Monet, *Le Chemin de fer*, 1872.

70. Armand Guillaumin, *Soleil couchant à Ivry*, 1873.

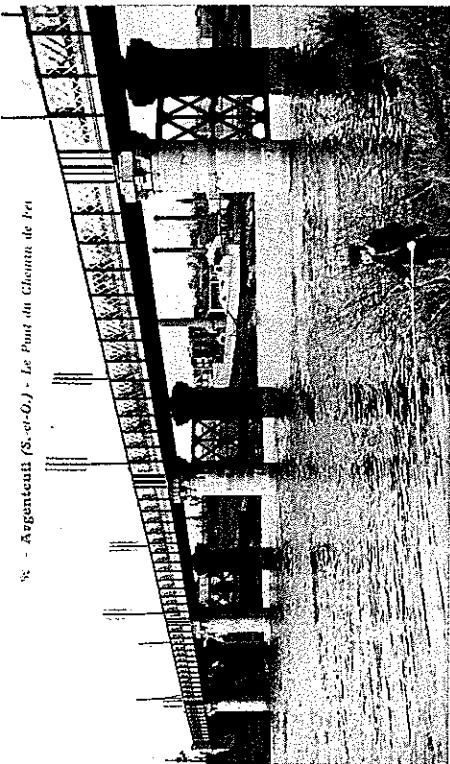


blame for everything—the water, the people, the shape of the hats. That might prove to be true in the long run, but the point about Argenteuil and its neighbours was that the long run seemed such a long way off. This was not a terrain where industry was master, even picturesquely so. It was not like the hillside at Déville-lès-Rouen, for example, which Monet had painted a few years before: a forest of chimneys belching smoke, and the railway running past them like a river in spate—industry as landscape, certainly, with three small strollers in the foreground twirling parasols and taking in the sights. Nor was it the forge at Ivry, as Guillaumin showed it in 1873, blocking the river, backlit and melodramatic; nor the quiet enclosure of Monet's *Ruisseau de Robec*; nor the blunt shape of the starch works at Saint-Ouen, in the oil by Pissarro done in 1873.

The presence of industry at Argenteuil is different from this. It lays



71. Camille Pissarro, *L'Usine, Saint-Ouen l'Aumône*, 1873.

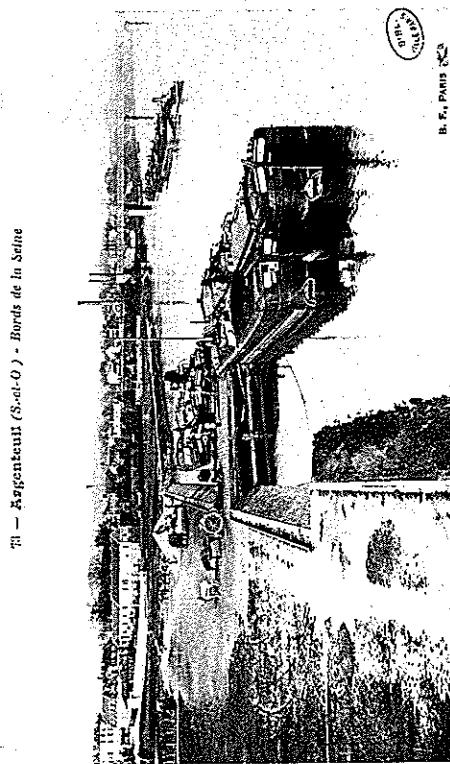


72. Anonymous, Argenteuil—Le Pont du chemin de fer, c. 1895-1900. Photograph.

claim to the landscape in rather the same way as the two people in the foreground—a bit erratically, a bit naively, acre by acre, without much of a flourish. And this seems to me the ultimate point of the picture's formal language. It fits its figures and landscape together, it makes out relations between them—between shoulders and water, chimney and halyard, straw hat and white wall—but the edges and links are mostly implausible, and surely meant to be so. The forms are like cut-outs against the bright blue ground; the outlines of everything are too sharp and simple.

This has to do, I think, with many things: with the look of objects close up in sunlight, with the fact that a picture is actually flat, and with the received wisdom in 1875 about such places as Argenteuil. It is not that Manet reproduced that wisdom in any simple form. His picture does not strike me as comic in the way of "Y" or Robert Caze; and irony is seemingly what he was working to avoid, above all in the woman's face. The best description is a limited one: the figures and landscape do not quite belong together yet; they are incomplete, they have the look of contingency. This does not mean they are shown as fugitive and impalpable, in the way of a sketch. On the contrary, the picture is massively *finished*; it is orderly and flawless, and the word "restrained" applies to it as much as the word "contingent." But whatever it is, it is not "natural": it is not offered the viewer as something already made and self-evident, there to be looked at and not questioned (this is true of landscape and figures alike). What Manet was painting was the look of a new form of life—a placid form, a modest

N° - Argenteuil (Seine-Oise) - Bords de la Seine



73. Anonymous, Argenteuil—Bords de la Seine, c. 1895-1900. Photograph.

form, but one with a claim to pleasure. The careful self-consciousness of the woman, her guarded attention to us, the leveness of her gaze: these are the best metaphors of that moment. It is Olympia's gaze again, but lacking the fierce engagement with the viewer or the edge of insecurity. This woman looks out circumspectly from a place that belongs to people like her. How good it is, in these places, to find a little solitude on Sundays! How good, how modern, how right and proper.

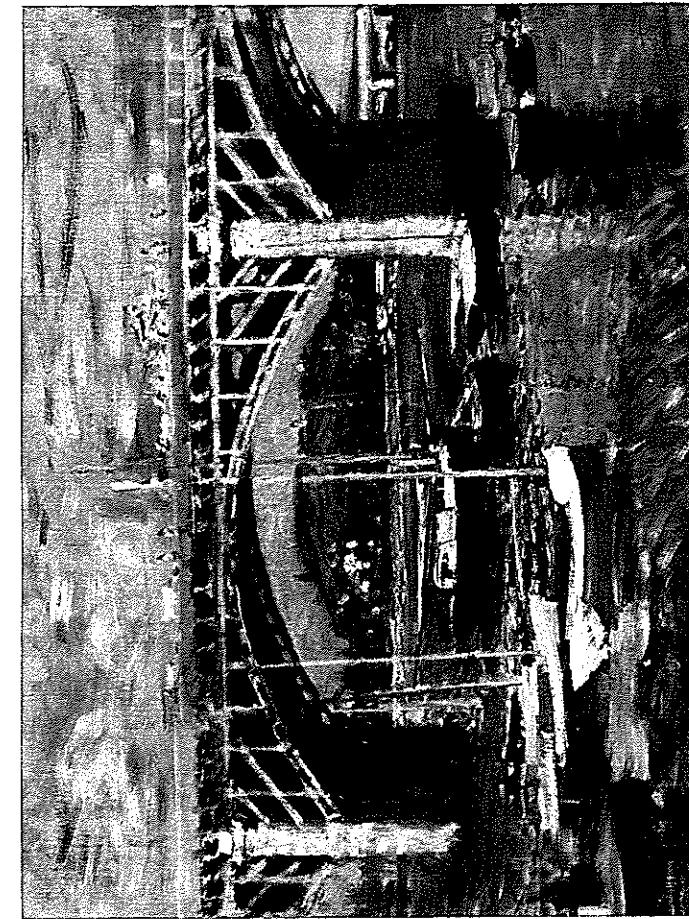
Argenteuil in the 1870s was modernizing fast.²⁸ It was still surrounded by vineyards, and one or two windmills looked down on it from the slopes of Orgemont²⁹ and Sannois. The *petit bleu d'Argenteuil*—it had been the theme of many a joke at Manet's expense in 1875—was still just drinkable; and whatever the quality of the wine, people came out from Paris to watch the peasants get drunk at *vendange*.³⁰ The town was "famous for its plethoric asparagus"³¹ and its figs: its agriculture was geared to the Parisian market, as it had been since the eighteenth century.³²

In the 1870s Argenteuil grew: it had 8,000 people at the beginning of the decade and close to 12,000 in 1882.³³ Part of that increase was straightforwardly suburban: the town was a fifteen-minute ride from the Gare de l'Ouest, and many a stockjobber and commercial traveller decided that it was just the place for a house and garden. To the west of Argenteuil grew up what the locals called "*la nouvelle cité*," and to the east "*la colonie*

parisienne."³³ Yet the majority of newcomers in the 1870s were most probably not bourgeois and no longer strictly Parisian: they were people who came in search of work to a town that was quietly making itself over to industry.

Already in the 1860s it had boasted factories and plaster works. Five hundred men had made their living in the gypsum quarries;³⁴ three hundred or so had worked for Monsieur Joly in his iron foundry next to the railway bridge. They built the Palace of Industry for the Exposition Universelle of 1867, and the great iron canopies for Les Halles; they tried their hand at bicycles for a year or two, and of course they forged the parts for the new railway bridge itself when it was rebuilt in 1872.³⁵ The town had a saw mill and several distilleries, a tannery, a gas works, an establishment which made mineral water, another producing cardboard boxes. There was lacemaking, fine crystal, and clocks. Bezons, to the south, had a rubber factory (by 1869 the waste from the plant had killed off the local fish).³⁶ In the 1870s more industry arrived: a new chemical works in 1872 and an albumin refinery two years later; another distillery, a second foundry with jobs for 170 men, and a third in 1876.

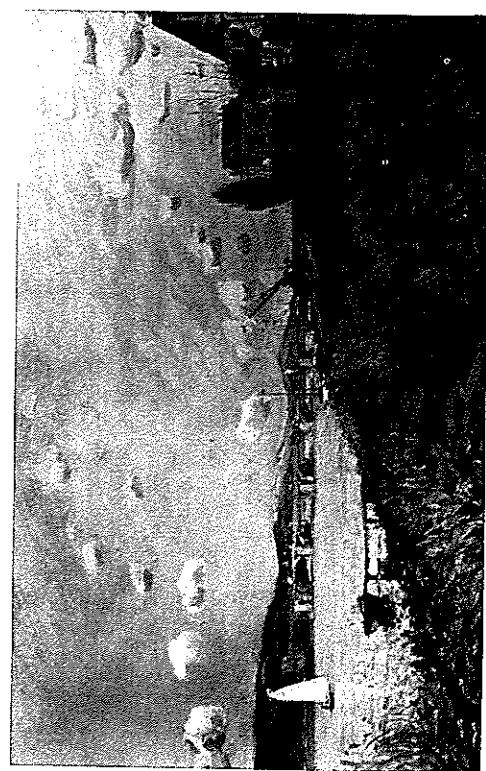
This list of premises and dates is all very well as far as it goes, but it does not rule on most of the decisive questions. It does not permit us to say how much these new activities marked the landscape or transformed it, or whether the factories somehow stood in the interstices of the town, left out of sight between the vineyards and the river. Certainly the landscape had long since lost its claim on the attention of the traveller in search of



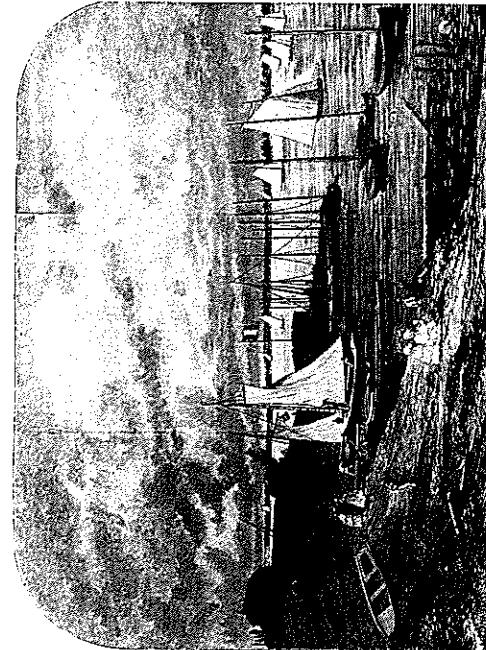
75. Claude Monet, *Le Pont de péage, Argenteuil*, 1874.

the picturesque, and Louis Barron, on the Argenteuil road in the 1880s, "made haste to flee the monotonous spectacle of the quarries, marking the hillsides with yellow, and the plaster works which keep a whole population of poor workers tied to the region, and the vines, and the interminable squares of vegetables bordering the road."³⁷ But Barron's verdict does not really speak to the town and its immediate hinterland, and it is that area which concerns us most. What we need to know about Argenteuil is how large the twenty factories loomed, and whether the piles of coal and plaster on the towpath actually *shoved*—whether they made the town look "industrial." (The force of that word is anyway not clear when applied to a place, as opposed to a way of working.)

The best evidence we have is Impressionist painting, but it too is ambiguous. Are we to trust the perspective it offers, for example, in Manet's *Bateau-atelier* (Plate XIV)—the river looking south and west, the atmosphere heavy with Ajalbert's twilight, the fields walled in with new buildings? Or should we prefer the hills upstream, in Sisley's hands or Renoir's,



74. Alfred Sisley, *Le Pont de péage à Argenteuil*, 1872.



76. Auguste Anastasi,
*Environs de Paris—Port
des clippers dans le bassin
d'Argenteuil*, 1858. Wood
engraving.

unmistakeable: they are there, innocently charted, in the engravings of the place published at the time in all the illustrated magazines. Argenteuil changes—from an open riverbank where clippers are drawn up casually for an afternoon, making use of a few slipways and a natural harbour; to a town still nestling deep in trees—the year is 1869—and a towpath still grassy and overgrown, but the river already thick with boats; to a bank which is crowded with shipyards, spectators, offices with boats-for-hire; to a suitable place for a steamboat race, or the launching of a new yacht, or the national rowing championships. Argenteuil was putting in its bid to be the capital of Parisian recreation—with what determination can be judged from this entry in *Le Petit-Journal* from May 1877, announcing the programme for Trinity Sunday:

Argenteuil (Gare Saint-Lazare)—Continuation of festivities. At 2:30, bicycle races organized by the Union Vélocipédique with music provided by the municipality; costumes *de rigueur*.—At 9:00, grand torchlight procession with music and the fire brigade.³⁸

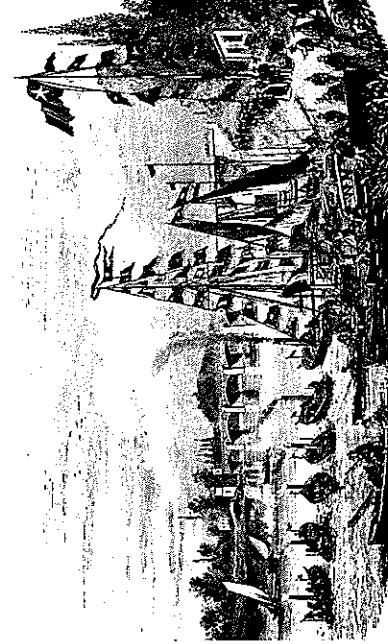
It is by far the most flamboyant of the twenty-two local entertainments listed that weekend.

No wonder that by 1884 the town has taken its place in the ironic discourse which the reader now knows well. This is Louis Blairet, for example, in *L'Opinion*, describing Argenteuil in his series “Autour de Paris”:

Come Sunday, there is an invasion of the Gare Saint-Lazare, lady fruit-sellers from the Rue Saint-Denis, cabinetmakers from the Rue de Cléry, girls who make chocolate in the Rue de Vivienne—there is not one of them who does not descend on the banks of the Seine, beneath the Moulin d'Orgemont or in the Auberge des Canotiers. And wherever there trots a Parisienne, a Parisien is sure to follow.



77. T. Weber, *Environs
de Paris—Argenteuil*,
1869. Wood engraving.



78. Anonymous, *Course
de canots à vapeur à
Argenteuil*, 1874. Wood
engraving.

without a sign of industry to interfere? Is it sleight of hand when Monet looks north through the toll bridge to the Côte de Sannois, and has one pillar of the bridge block out the Joly ironworks to the right—sleight of hand or felicitous arrangement? Might not the composition speak quite well, in fact, to the modest place of such things in the landscape, to the way they hardly interrupted vision?

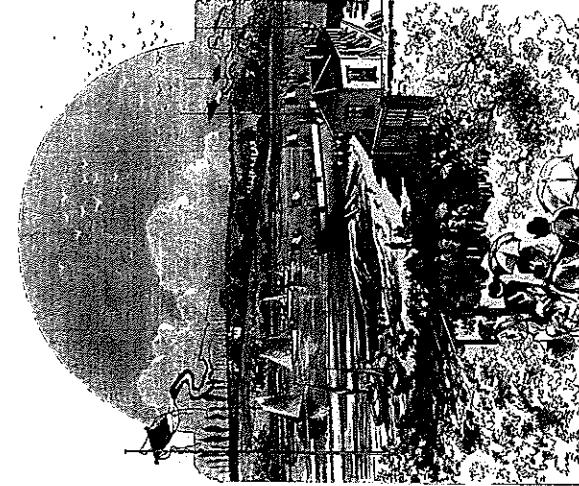
One thing undoubtedly did mark the town, and that was the invasion of the pleasure seekers. The effects of that process on the riverside were

... There is singing, shouting, dancing, running about, falling down, and going astray. It all begins with *entrecôtes au creton* and ends with aching limbs. The banks of the Seine are full of mysteries that day, mysteries of the private and pastoral life.

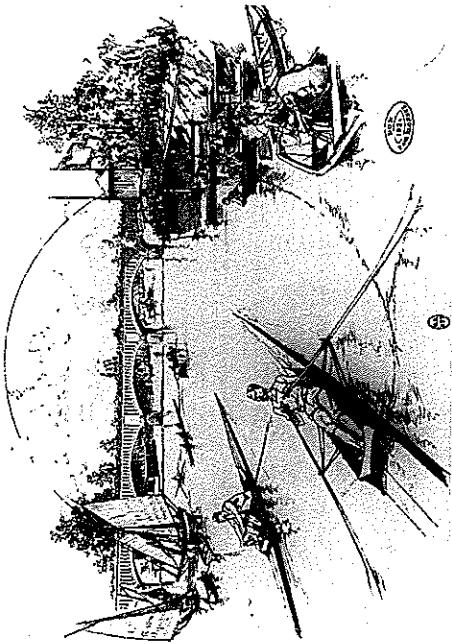
Here we serve lobster salad on the grass, messieurs!³⁹

The terms are the normal ones: grocers' wives and cabinetmakers have once again put paid to the genuine *fête champêtre* and established a counterfeit in its place. Argenteuil is part of the environs of Paris and can therefore be condescended to.

79. Ferdinandus,
*Lancement d'un navire à
Argenteuil*, 1877. Wood
engraving.



80. M. Grenier, *Course du
championnat de France
dans le bassin
d'Argenteuil*, r886. Wood
engraving.

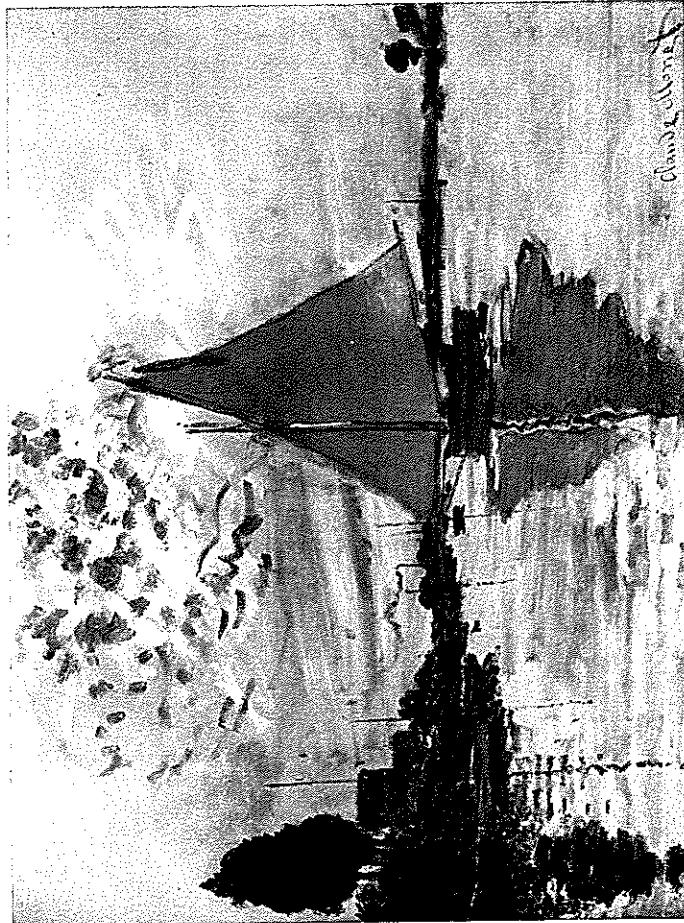
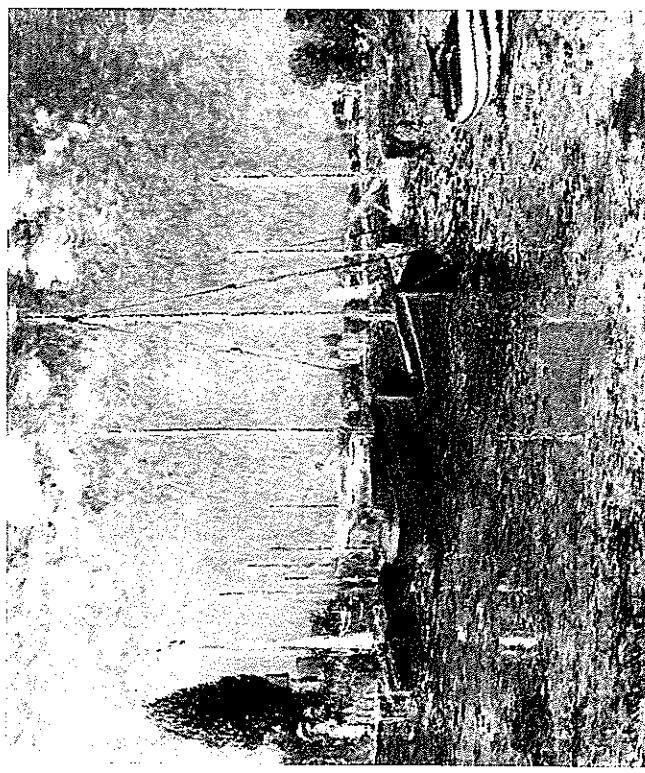


The other main picture Manet did at Argenteuil in 1874 was a portrait of his younger colleague Claude Monet at work in his houseboat studio (Plate XIV). The scene is presented from roughly the same vantage point as that of *Argenteuil, les canotiers*, though now the horizon is opened wide enough to give a glimpse of the Gennevilliers shore. The chimneys are all smoking fiercely, and the house with the mansard is no more than a smudge. To the left there is much the same debris of masts and furled sails as in *Les Canotiers*, though one of the yachts is sailing now, or at least has its mainsail hoisted.

Monet, at any rate, is turned away from the evidence of industry: he seems to be looking towards the right, past a further crop of boats and rigging, whose forms are blocked out on the canvas on his easel. His manner of working is something Manet clearly admired and wanted his viewers to know about; he showed them Monet's way of painting in the way he put on paint himself: it is looser and lighter than in *Les Canotiers*, with the edges of most things no longer so sharply outlined. The bow of the houseboat, for example, is splashed with a hatchwork of blue and grey strokes, and the water has lost its absolute colour—it is grey, yellow, white, and green, mixed up with reflections and seeping into every solid it touches. The picture is surely concerned to associate these qualities with others the critics thought Monet deficient in: steadiness, for instance, patience, concentration, relentless detachment. The patient may strike us as belonging to the self-effacing wife as much as to her husband, but the relentlessness is all Monet's own. It is there in the profile he offers the viewer, sharp against a plain blue ground; and in the way his brush is held, tight in the fingers like a pen, ready for rapid and sure notation.

What Monet is insistent on is *landscape*; and Manet's depiction of him might be read as a kind of reflection on what it meant to keep hold of that category in a place like Argenteuil. It meant contriving to notice some things that loomed large in one's field of vision and to overlook others just as prominent; a picture depended on choosing and maintaining a certain point of view, doing so often with fastidious and, in its way, cynical care. No doubt painting landscape had always involved some such process of reading out and reading in; but what the painter excluded had rarely been there so emphatically, so much wrapped up with the matter in hand. Landscape is in doubt in Manet's picture: the sheer range of shapes and

incidents which cry out for representation puts the whole business of landscape in question, and Monet has seemingly turned away from the untidiness, preferring to focus on what the scene still offers of pleasure or nature in undiluted form. Manet, by contrast, still looks to the south and west, as if resolved to show that the Bezons reach could be faced by painting—even painting of Monet's kind. There was a way to put down such matters in oils and have them be part of landscape quite strictly conceived. They would have to be sketched in lightly, almost carelessly, without much attention being paid to differences and identities, to the weight and substance of objects. The whole thing would necessarily be done with a great show of painterly wit, a flaunting of facility, as if daring the world to resist one's notation of it; and if the tour de force was successful, the play of paint would absorb the factories and weekend villas with scarcely a ripple. Surface would replace substance; paint would *perform* the consistency of landscape, in spite of everything a particular landscape might put in its way; there was nothing that could not be made part of a picture—of a picture's fragile unity—if the painter confined himself to appearances

81. Claude Monet, *Les Bateaux rouges, Argenteuil*, 1875.82. Claude Monet, *Le Voilier au Petit Gennevilliers*, 1874.

and put aside questions of meaning or use.

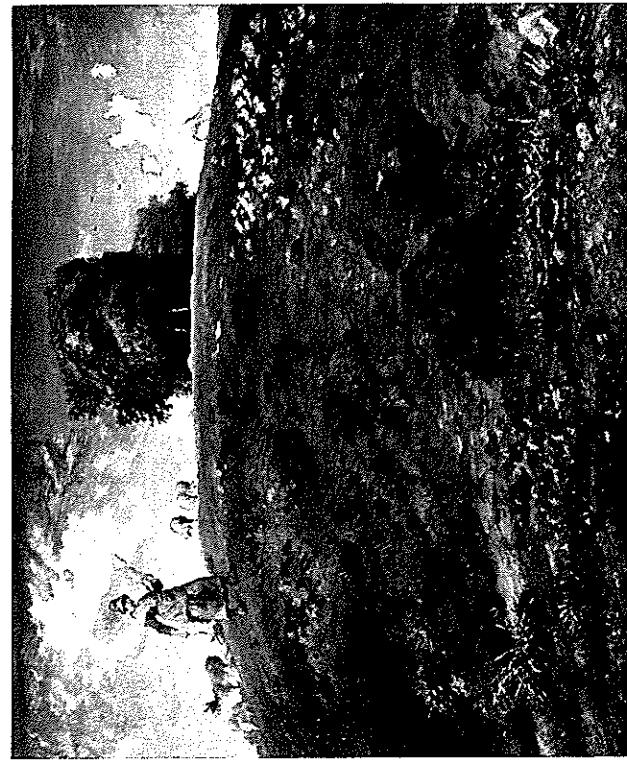
It may even be that one does Monet an injustice by having him disagree with that last verdict. If we look again at the picture on his easel and take notice of the tree at left, and the masts and water in roughly the right places, we may end by believing that Monet too is out to paint the view behind him—the one downriver, towards the smoke. Are we given enough on the slanting canvas to reconstruct a picture something like *Les Bateaux rouges, Argenteuil* or *Au Petit Gennevilliers*? (No particular surviving Monet seems quite to fit the vague clues on offer, but there are four or five which show the same slice of riverbank rendered from more or less the same spot.⁴⁹) Pictures like the one I have chosen are in their way more absolute with industry than Manet could ever quite be. They look towards the industrial shore and do not seem for a moment to find the litter over there at odds with the water and masts in the middle ground; they have no high horizon with chimneys separate and clear; such things are incidental to the landscape, and if the painting stands to benefit, they can simply be left

out. (That happens quite often and is done very matter-of-factly.) In any case, suppression is not usually necessary. The signs of industry can be included, in a picture like *Le Voilier au Petit Gennevilliers*, but in such a way that they hardly register as different from the signs of nature or recreation. A chimney is not so different from a tree or a mast; the shape and consistency of a trail of smoke can be taken up in other, stronger traces—the edge of a reflection or the body of a cloud. The factory is a minor note, and the smoke serves to provoke various analogies—between smoke and paint, smoke and cloud, cloud and water—all of them guaranteeing the scene's coherence.

The chimneys, in other words, are made part of landscape as Monet imagined it. And landscape, for Monet as for many other painters in the later nineteenth century, was the one genre left. They seemed to believe—the belief was not often stated explicitly, but the drift of practice is unmistakeable—that nature possessed consistency now, in a way that nothing else did. It had a presence and a unity which agreed profoundly (this was the crucial point) with the act of painting. The flat union of a picture like Monet's was *like* landscape, like the look of sky and water *en plein air*; and these were the things on which painting could thrive. No other subject proved to match so well with the actual material of oil and canvas; no other offered painting the right kind of resistance, the kind which had the medium seem more real the harder it was pressed in the service of an illusion.

This was a powerful belief and in some ways a merited one. The achievements of the previous generation, and above all the work of Courbet and the Barbizon school, could be taken to confirm it; though they also suggested—in Millet's art the suggestion was particularly strong—that the genre of landscape would have to be rephrased and extended if it were to go on providing matter for major art. The genre came down to the new group of painters in a necessarily complex form, with a special and in many ways perplexing history; and that history was not a dead past. It was supposedly part of the genre's appeal to practitioners that it seemed to offer them a wealth of examples which were still effective, still useable in detail. Landscape painters had access to a tradition, they believed; they were confident that there was almost as much still to be learnt from Hobbema and Ruysdael, say, as from Daubigny and Jongkind; they might even go further and say that learning from the latter pair *was* learning from the former, and that a painter looked closely at Ruysdael precisely in order to understand better what Daubigny was doing.

The vividness of the tradition was exacting as well as helpful. The painter of landscape was notoriously engrossed in the natural world as it



83. Jean-François Millet, *Pâturage sur la montagne, en Auvergne*, 1867-69.

simply was, as it stood over there in front of his easel; and yet nature was nothing for painters if not encountered in other people's painting, and it existed there in not at all simple form. Nature had substance for Monet and his friends as a term in a tradition; they learnt it as part of their practice, by using and adapting what the Dutch had done, or Constable and Corot. The term in the hands of these older masters was specially protean: there *was* no nature, in the great tradition of landscape painting, except as part of a movement, an equivocation, in which Man and Nature (bravely capitalized) were seen to depend on each other for their sense. Landscape put together the man-made and the natural, the wild and the cultivated, the elements and man's attempts to defy them. Certainly it celebrated the limits of the human world, and often affirmed that people lived in a landscape that was not put there simply for their convenience—or not securely. There was the sea, the marshland, storms, waterfalls, wilderness, dark woods, ruins. But the wilderness could be charted, marshes drained, land pulled from the sea and found fertile; waterfalls could turn wheels and ruins be restored and venerated.

These are the obvious examples, and no doubt they seem to come a little

pat; but that is largely because they are the repeated conceits of the genre, by now a bit stale in the telling. Whether one looks at the painters of Rome and its *campagna*, or the Dutch, or the English in the eighteenth century, or Auvers and Barbizon, it is always the difficult, provisional relation of man to nature—the extent to which man makes the landscape or is made by it—that is the main motif. It is the stuff of landscape painting, this progress from barren waste to broken column to rude cot to decent farm to thriving village to nesting town with determinate edge; or from commons to enclosure and rapids to sluice. The modern artists of the 1870s inherited this idiom: they shared the older painters' assumption that nature could hardly be seen in the first place—or construed as an order apart from the human—unless as something mapped and tended, interfered with and not infrequently replaced by man. And how was man present in his landscape? What kind of mark did he make upon it, what kind of boundaries; how had his artifacts made peace with their surroundings, or had they made peace at all? (It was not necessarily the case that they should: a city wall and a windmill were equally part of a well-ordered province.) What forms of *visibility* were provided as part of this overall process of control and understanding? How was the countryside kept at a distance, brought into view, produced as a single human thing, a prospect or a panorama? Upon the answers to questions like these depended the artist's sense of a scene's amounting to landscape at all, and therefore being paintable.

These were practical matters, in other words, not just theoretical ones; from them derived the exercise of landscape as an art and the possession of its basic terms and skills. In the 1870s the questions recurred with a vengeance; they were not essentially different from the previous ones, but there was a feeling abroad that the answers this time might not prove particularly encouraging. Was there a way now for landscape to admit the new signs of man in the countryside—the chimneys, the villas, the apparatus of pleasure? Could the factory be added to the series which went from wilderness to working river? (And if not, why not?) Was the city with determinate edge to be joined, in painting, by the city without one? How much of inconsistency and waste could the genre include and still keep its categories intact? So landscape was to be *modern*; but if it was—if the

* The most interesting verbal evidence that questions of inclusion and exclusion—and questions of overall *attitude* towards landscape—were consciously raised at the time by painters of the group comes from Georges Rivière, the friend of Renoir and critical champion of the Impressionists in 1877. In his *Renoir et ses amis*, p. 182, he discusses Renoir's sunny view of Bougival, Saint-Cloud, and Argenteuil, and adds: "This landscape terrains vagues strewn with rubbish, scabby grass trodden by inhabitants in rags, miserable

signs of modernity were agreed on and itemized—would the landscape not be robbed of what the painters valued most in it? Would it not lose its singular beauty, its coherence, the way it seemed to offer itself as an unbroken surface which paint could render well? For Monet and his colleagues, landscape was the guarantee of *painting* above all; it was the thing that justified their insistence on matter and making, on the artisanal facts of the art. Perhaps that guarantee would not hold, least of all in places like Argenteuil. But painting in a sense had nowhere else to go. It was here that the terms of the landscape tradition still seemed to present themselves with some kind of vividness. The roll call of edges and stages of civilization could still be taken at Argenteuil, as once it had been outside Rome or Haarlem. Without such a roll call, landscape painting was a poor thing.

Monet moved to Argenteuil just before Christmas 1871 and lived in the town for the next six years. Friends came to stay and paint—Sisley in 1872, Renoir on several occasions. Caillebotte's family had a summer place across the river at Petit Gennevilliers, and Manet lodged there while painting *Argenteuil, les canotiers*. Landscape painters came and went, but mostly the town and the river were Monet's property, and he charted them in picture after picture—over 150 by the time he left.

I do not intend to sum up the character of 150 canvases in a page or two, still less to endow them with an overall "attitude" to the landscapes they show. Their attitudes—and the very word had better be used sparingly, with the emphasis on the physical side of the underlying metaphor—are many; and from year to year Monet seems to have sought out quite different things in his surroundings, to have been seized with a sudden enthusiasm for a motif and given it up equally suddenly, made use of snowstorms or floods, painted reedy backwaters because at last he had a boat equipped to get him there, and so on. Yet something can be said about these pictures' specificity as landscapes: we can point to the ways they diverge from the genre's normal range of motifs. I believe that the paintings provide evidence that Monet was thoroughly alive, at least in his first three years at Argenteuil, to the kind of problem I outlined previously. In picture after picture—some of them frankly experimental and botched—he seems to be testing ways to extend landscape painting's range of reference and still have it

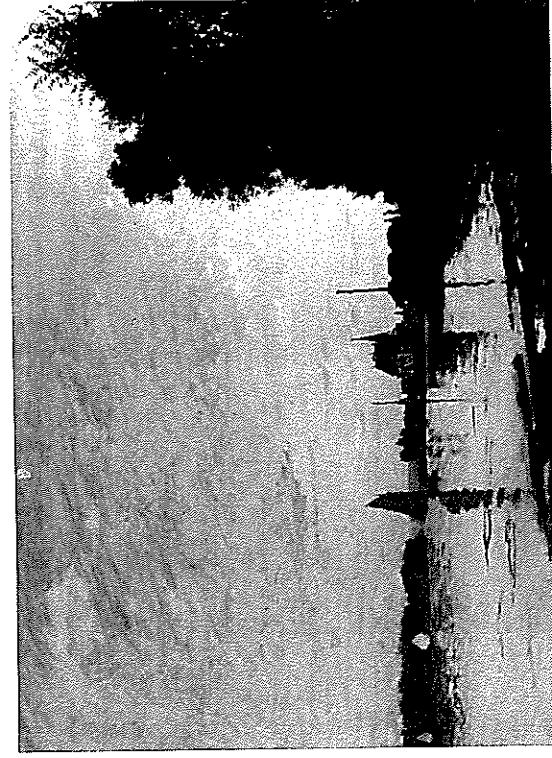
hovels and tumble-down cottages, a grey sky punctuated by tall factory chimneys belching thick black smoke. It is exactly the same place, but seen by men of different temperaments and interpreted in both cases with equal sincerity. I am thinking, in writing this, of Raffaelli, who exhibited with the Impressionists. "—In his pictures, Renoir said to me one day, looking at a picture by Raffaelli, everything is poor, even the grass!"

serve his fierce, necessarily narrow conception of what painting was and ought to be.

About one of the new items in the landscape he never appears to have had much doubt. The boats on the river were there to be painted, even if, as happened on the Gennevilliers shore, they blocked out half the horizon and brought with them an accompaniment of floating offices, boatyards, boathouses, pontoons, and villas all bidding for their few yards of river frontage. The crush did not matter, or it did not seem offensive. 'The sails and masts were a useful middle ground; they added a touch of geometry, not too insistent, which the painter could edit or soften as he saw fit. Monet himself was part of the boating world; in one or two paintings from 1874 he found room for his own houseboat studio, tied up to a slipway next to the bureau where yachts could be rented'⁸⁴ (Plate XV). The studio was part of the general litter, its outline more ungainly than most of its neighbours.

There was an industry of pleasure taking its place in the landscape, making the river available to people who wished to go as far as Bezons, take a closer look at the false Louis XIII villa—the one with the mansard roof—and be back in time for the train. This industry could certainly be made part of landscape painting; Monet is often at his strongest when he spells out the encroachment of pleasure on the countryside, but insists, in the way he handles it, that the scene has lost none of its unity and charm. Pleasure of this kind is natural, these pictures seem to imply: it gives access to nature, whatever the ironists say. No doubt there was something abrupt and superficial about the boaters' encounter with the Bezons shore, but speed and superficiality were not qualities necessarily to be despised in one's dealings with nature. Did not Monet's own painting, in the 1870s, experiment with ways to make such qualities part of its repertoire? Were not pictures required to be more casual and lighthearted now, less encumbered with grand forms and correct ideas? Did not Monet's painting make believe—the fiction was as crucial as it was peculiar—that its maker succeeded at breakneck speed and could hardly tell a hawk from a handsaw, let alone a chimney from a mast?⁸⁵ Perhaps it was true that Argenteuil was a factory, with nature produced as its best commodity; but Monet was seemingly prepared to accept the fact, and take his place among the amorous marines.

Argenteuil, we have seen, had factories of the normal kind, more of them each year. The question therefore arose whether this industry would interfere with the other, and to that Monet's answer was less unequivocal. In due course he seems to have decided that it would and did, and that was presumably part of the reason for his moving from Argenteuil in 1878



84. Claude Monet, *La Promenade d'Argenteuil*, 1872.
85. Claude Monet, *Argenteuil, fin de l'après-midi*, 1872.



87. Claude Monet, *Le Pont de péage à Argenteuil*, 1874.

and setting up house in an unspoilt spot. (Though it is a notorious fact that four trains a day passed along the railway line that cut off the artist's garden at Giverny from his precious lily ponds.) But again, in the first three years at Argenteuil his painting often seemed to dispute the very terms of the antithesis. What did it take, after all, to *spoil* a landscape? If one looked downriver on the Argenteuil side, did not the factory chimneys chime in with the villas and tree trunks, and was not the saw-toothed outline of the factory taken up in the mansard roofs and sails? Industry could surely be made part of the idyll if the painter tried hard enough; it could be precisely and firmly stated, but nonetheless balanced with landscape's other elements. We have seen Monet do it already in *Le Voilier au Petit Gemmillers*; and in the four pictures he painted in 1872 on the promenade at Argenteuil he seems to be plotting the various means to put leisure and industry together.⁴³ Smoke drifts gently into a clouded sky in one; the blue roof of the villa is framed by trees in another, with the right-hand chimney half masked by leaves, and with smoke pouring from it like a pennant; people stroll on the footpath in black and grey, their shapes picked out against the water, played off against the white of the yachts. The chimneys catch the evening sun in another, and the shadows of trees establish distance on the promenade. In the largest picture of the four, the painter goes down to the water's edge and has the chimneys dark against the sky, with a sail put next to them in silhouette, and all three forms throwing long, clear reflections across the water; from this vantage point the whole shape of the factory is visible and plainly stated. Industry is



186. Claude Monet, *Le Pont de Bougival*, 1870.

(These pictures from 1872 take up a format Monet first devised two years earlier, in his great *Pont de Bourgival*: they imitate that painting's composition and also its basic tone. The landscape of the later nineteenth century is to be celebrated above all for its orderliness and domesticity: it is all decent gas lamps and solid pedestrians, paved streets and convenient *terrasses de restaurant*. There is not a discarded melon in sight.)

There are other pictures of a similar kind from the first three years, chimneys appearing at the end of a path between the vineyards, aligned with Argenteuil's church steeple; chimneys in among reeds or almost lost in mist; smoke pouring from the funnel of a dredger or a barge, making freehand looped reflections in the water; floodwater or snow overtaking flowers in the foreground of much the same scene, with the factories just above them in the distance, a vague grey against a pale yellow, smoke from the chimneys scrawled in lightly.⁴⁴

There is a rule to these paintings, and it might be said follows: Industry can be recognized and represented, but not labour; the factories have to be kept still, as if that were the guarantee of their belonging to the landscape—a strange guarantee in an art which pretended to relish the fugitive and ephemeral above all else. Industry must not mean *work*; as long as that fictitious distinction was in evidence, a painting could include as much of the nineteenth century as it liked. The railway, for instance, was an ideal subject because its artifacts could so easily be imagined as

88. Claude Monet,
Argenteuil, *la berge en
fleurs*, 1877.



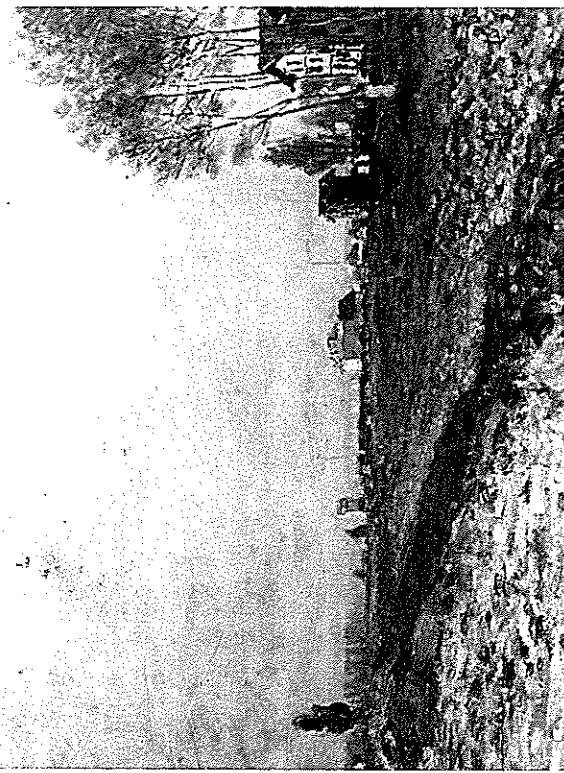
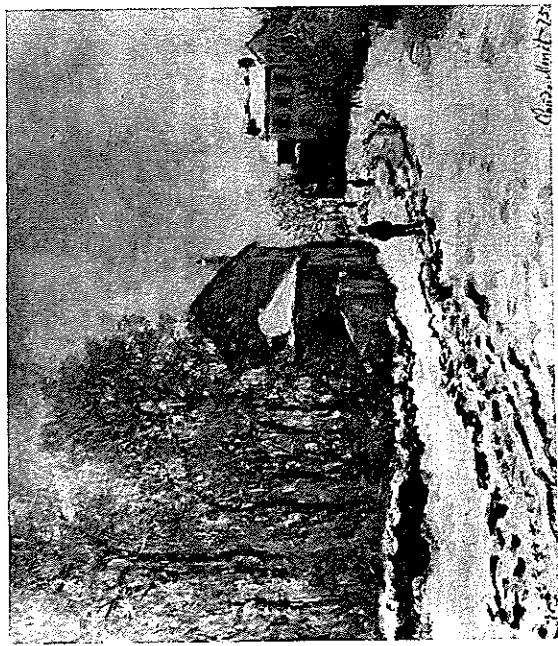
But this is not a picture of Argenteuil. It is a scene by another bridge entirely, at Asnières, two or three miles down the railway line towards Paris. The rule is therefore followed after all: it seems that labour must always be absent from Argenteuil, and it is as if this single unlikely picture—Monet himself called it *une note à part*—were done to confirm that fantasy and make it safe.⁴⁶ Labour would be imagined once, and the full range of qualities belonging to it be articulated—physical effort, caution, constraint, stiffness, monotony, even gloom. But it would be imagined somewhere else, as part of a landscape all its own. The qualities just listed are the strict opposites of those belonging to Argenteuil (or later to Giverny, and by implication to painting in general). Instead of effort there had to be an easy lucidity; openness, spontaneity, the taking of risks and a willingness to improvise; above all there was not to be gloom. These were the characteristics of art itself and especially of landscape; they expressed the way that the one category informed the other now, and was its substance if the painter performed well. Such a picture of art necessarily depended on a strict system of exclusions.

It would be wrong to leave the impression, however, that Monet was systematic at Argenteuil. There is no single dominant sequence in the pictures he painted in the 1870s; there are many series, some echoing the others' strategies and some not; and there are single pictures, seemingly left behind from abandoned campaigns, pointing in all kinds of directions. It was true that labour could not be represented: the rule applied to agriculture as much as to industry, and the fields at Argenteuil are either empty or occupied by people with parasols.⁴⁷ But suburbia occasionally could be. There is a painting from 1873 which apparently represents the hinterland on the Gennevilliers side of the river, not far from where *les canotiers* must have been sitting; and it could almost be taken, compositionally speaking, as companion piece to van Gogh's painting of the Plaine Saint-Denis thirteen years later (p. 25).⁴⁸ The foreground of Monet's picture is the same dishevelled waste of half-tilled, half-abandoned land, all frost and inconsequential furrows; and to the right, in the middle ground, are a few suitably rachitic trees concealing a villa, three storeys high, complete with a roof of vermillion tiles. Farther back is another house, looking much the same as its neighbour, and then another and another; and so on down the riverbank towards Bezons. Bezons's chimneys are registered, lightly, with a couple of easy, unmistakable strokes; but what the eye is mainly directed to is the *terrain vague* in the foreground, and the pungent red and yellow of the villas taking irregular possession of the plain.

This landscape cannot fairly be described as suburban, for there is too much space still remaining between the weekend retreats; but it can hardly

between images, his dying fall, his apologetic dots at the end of a line.⁴⁹ Monet's picture secures its meaning through analogous devices: the looming redundancy of the earth in the painting's bottom third, the peculiar elusiveness of its horizon line, the tracks and furrows which lead off so boldly nowhere in particular, the general uncertainty of scale and lack of relation between its main parts. Is the picture's immediate frosty foreground somehow raised higher than the ground to the right? How far away is the solitary left-hand tree, and where does it stand with respect to the houses? And so on . . .)

And then, finally, there was the inside of Argenteuil. During the years Monet lived there, the town was constantly changing shape, not just at the edges but internally as well. Wide new roads were built and old ones resurfaced, drains were laid, saplings planted à la Haussmann, land given over to *lotissements*, cafés opened, and remaining spaces fenced off in readiness for the developers. The process was most likely unspectacular and must have seemed rather a nuisance; Monet held back from painting the town until the first months of 1875, and what seems to have made the place paintable then—and discouraged him from going farther afield from his house—was a covering of snow. The weather gave Argenteuil the unity it lacked, taking the edges off most things. The signs of construction in *Effet d'hiver à Argenteuil*—those haphazard piles of stones in the foreground—are naturalized, as it were, by the fall of snow. The new streets

89. Claude Monet, *Gelée blanche au Petit Gennevilliers*, 1873.90. Claude Monet, *Neige à Argenteuil*, 1875.

be called countryside, in Monet's terms. It is too empty to deserve the name; too ragged and indiscriminate, lacking in incident and demarcation apart from that provided by the houses (which does not amount to much); too formless, too perfunctory and bleak. These negatives add up, it seems to me, to a specific kind of composition, one appropriate to the thing in hand: they are Monet's way of giving form to the elusiveness of Argenteuil's surroundings, their slow dissolution into something else. What had to be registered was the imperceptibility of the change; there had to be a sense of its almost not happening, and the factories and villas perhaps not posing a threat; the earth ought to be shown degenerating gradually in a fine light, and the viewer feel that the process was accidental, almost modest, a bit of a waste but not necessarily more than that. The tone and imagery are reminiscent of van Gogh, but also of Ajalbert, with both picture and poem describing the landscape in an elliptical, half-cheerful deadpan. (Ajalbert was indebted to Jules Laforgue, and adapted for his purposes the younger poet's flatness of diction, his pretence of losing a train of thought

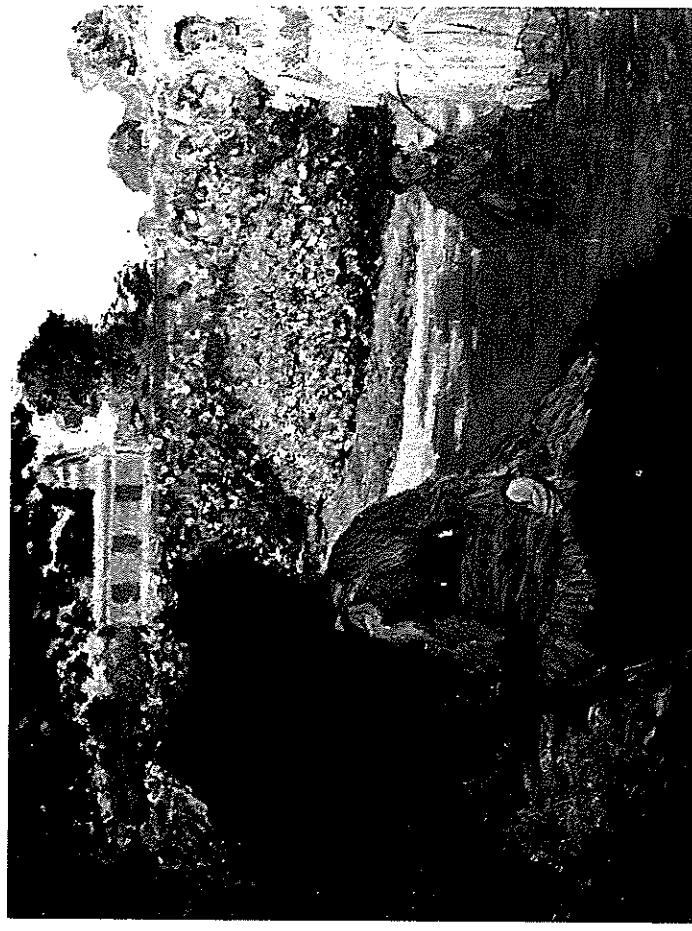
91. Claude Monet, *Le Bassin*, 1873.

are similarly disguised, their surfaces enlivened by the erratic traces of cartwheels and a pattern of fresh-trod, improvised paths. There were fifteen paintings done in early 1875,⁵⁰ and in spite of the snow the impression they end up giving of the town is of a place essentially lacking form, a territory of tracks, odd corners, abrupt coexistence of new streets and old waste land. Argenteuil was full of spaces where the town gave way to a stream, a marsh, and a few trees, and even its built-up areas often had the look of an overgrown village, all loose ends and lean-tos. The town was proud of its rural appearance and wanted it preserved; but it wished to be modern and have amenities, and it laid out new boulevards leading to the railway station.

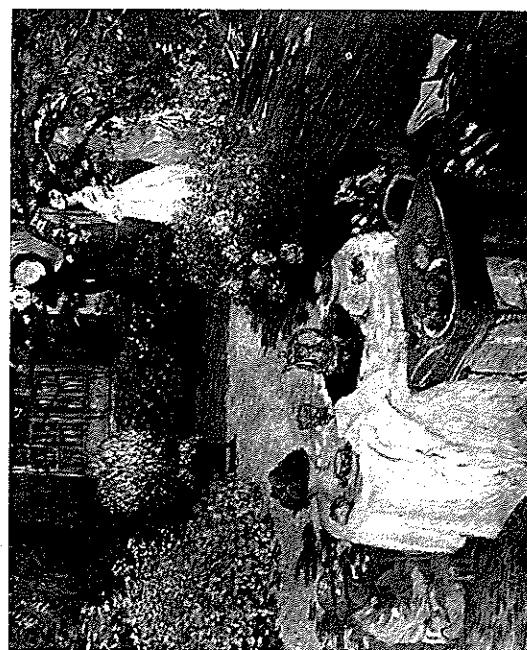
There is a pair of pictures by Monet from 1875 which I take to be contrary views of much the same spot, across from Monet's house in the Boulevard Saint-Denis (Plates XX and XXI).⁵¹ (The house was hard by the railway station—convenient for an afternoon trip to the dealer's.) In one, the painter is looking across the boulevard from a small path which leads to the station yard; an embankment goes up to the railway at the left, with some kind of shed at the top of the slope in an unpossessing clump of bushes; snow is falling, a watery sun is struggling through the clouds, and people are pushing their way to the station, holding umbrellas. The house in the background to the right, with the steep roof and the two green balconies, is the one where Monet lived. It was as brand-new as the boulevard; Monet had moved in the previous October. The other painting is of the same scene, essentially, as it must have looked from one of those balconies or through the painter's studio window. It is certainly the view from Monet's new house: the boulevard, the path, the figures with umbrellas are the same, and the wicker fences and the railway shed. Beyond them is a little square in front of the station with regulation plane trees; the station itself, a factory or two, a smokestack, and the Côte de Sannois. What we see is the artist's immediate world: his street, the way he went to Paris, his glimpse of open country. Is it any wonder that he chose to paint it only once? It stood too well for everything painting was supposed to ignore: the litter of fences and factories, the town seeping like a stain into the surrounding fields, the incoherence of everyday life. A painter in the nineteenth century very often believed he was faced with a choice because of such things, and here it appears with horrible vividness. Outside the window are the suburbs, and people determined to catch their train in spite of the weather. Inside the house is the world of landscape, preserved after all from the ironists' chatter. The house would have a garden, with high hedges and borders and permanent profusion. The painter would make his own landscape there, in a place he could fill with intimate things,

hoops, hats, coffee, children, wives, maids. It would be an interior, a fiction, a *horrorus conclusus*. There would be people in it, brought on to emphasize its artificiality: his wife, Camille, stiff-jointed on a garden bench, complete with snug proprietor; Camille holding the parasol, the maid holding the hoop and small boy; Camille putting up her hair among the dahlias, with the child like a broken toy on the grass; a great dim emptiness circulating round the table always laid for lunch; and, finally, the garden brought into the house—a watery, vegetable, uterine stillness, all polished floors and potted plants, with wife and child looking out of the orifice towards the daylight.⁵² The painter is sitting on his balcony again, looking the other way.

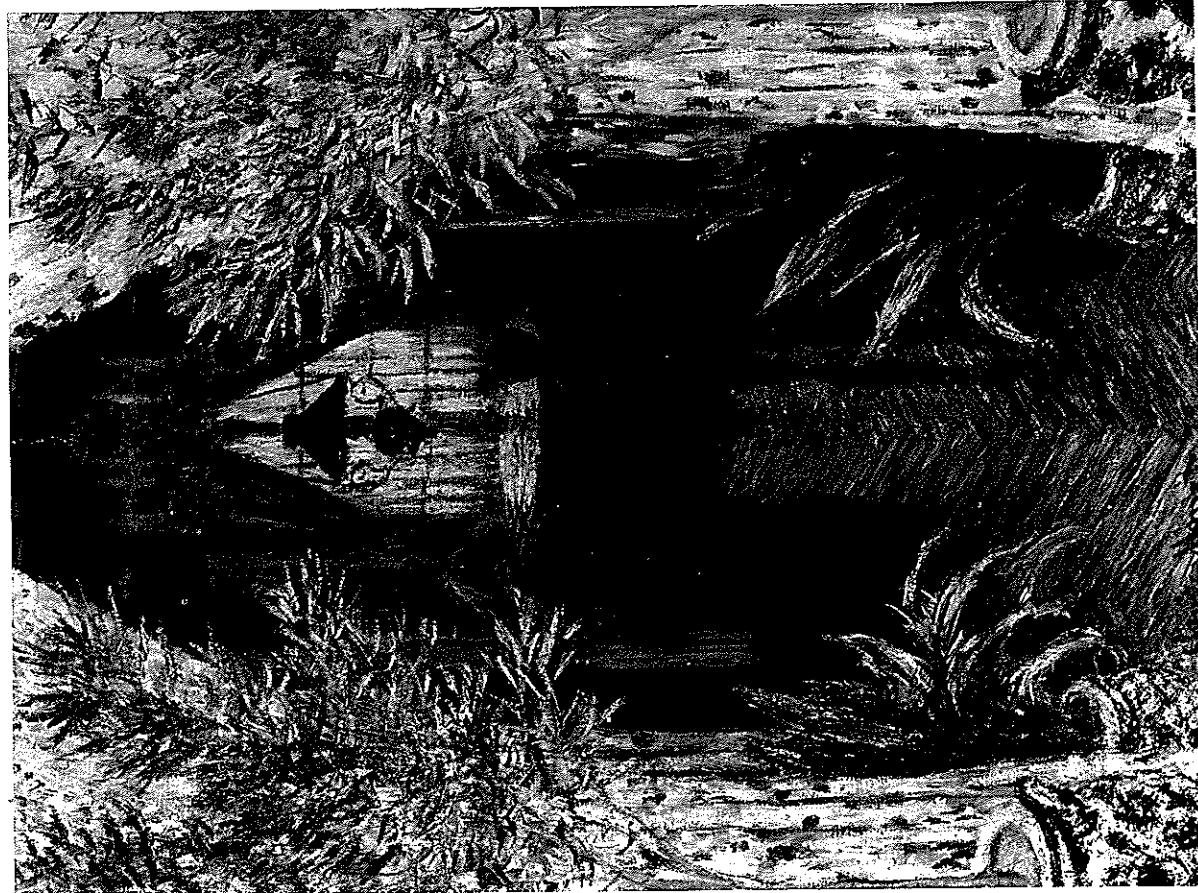
This last series of pictures points forward to the work Monet did in the 1890s and later. The people gradually fall away, the garden grows larger, the studio is put out on a promontory next to the lily pond and the paintings are filled with weeds, water, flowers, and reflections of clouds. This chapter has tried to suggest the circumstances of such a choice, and I want to end by listing again the things in the outside world that proved inimical to landscape, and eventually to art.



92. Claude Monet,
*Camille au jardin, avec
Jean et sa bonne*, 1873.



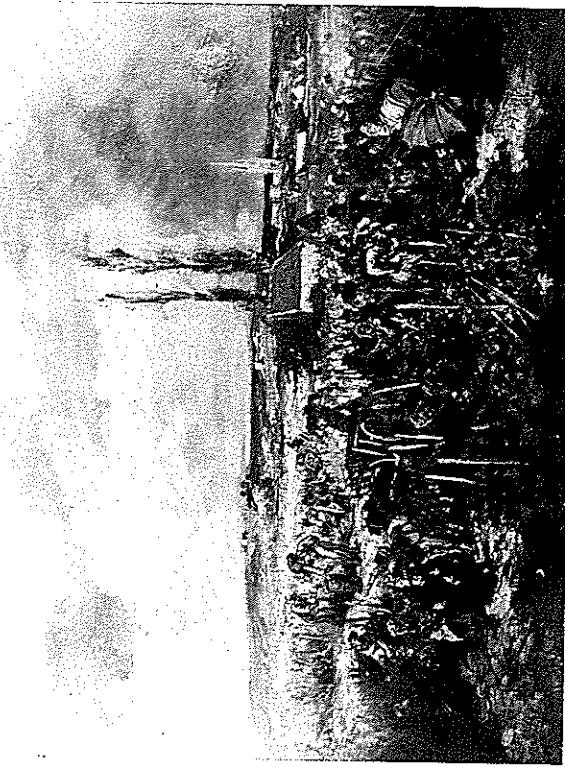
93. Claude Monet, *Le
Déjeuner*, 1873.



94. Claude Monet, *Un Coin d'appartement*, 1875.

The countryside was being made part of the city; that was the first notorious claim. Several different things were meant by the formula. There was a sort of nature being built into the city's actual fabric: parks and squares and suchlike, homeopathic doses of air and greenery which were sure to do someone good. Yet no one pretended that this was a substitute for real fields and woods, and, after all, the genuine article could be had any time for the price of a round-trip ticket. It was the age of the "outing." The word itself, said the *Saturday Review* in 1861, "may not be found in Richardson or Webster or, indeed, anywhere within the pale of lexicon orthodoxy, but we are prepared to justify the use of it notwithstanding."⁵⁵ Of course they were: the word and the activity were suddenly indispensable. Perhaps it is, strictly speaking, wrong to talk of the countryside's being included in Paris. For literally it was not: it was a kind of foil or frame for the city, and it took a little time to get out to it. There would have been no point to Argenteuil and Bougival if they had ceased altogether to be exotic. Parisians were looking for somewhere to act naturally, to relax and be spontaneous; people took pleasure in Argenteuil; they did what they wanted there, they left the city behind. That was the sense in which

Perhaps it is, strictly speaking, wrong to talk of the countryside's being included in Paris. For literally it was not: it was a kind of foil or frame for the city, and it took a little time to get out to it. There would have been no point to Argenteuil and Bougival if they had ceased altogether to be exotic. Parisians were looking for somewhere to act naturally, to relax and be spontaneous; people took pleasure in Argenteuil; they did what

95. Roland Debreux, *Les Vendanges à Argenteuil*, 1875.

96. Paul Renonard, *Les Régates d'automne à Argenteuil*. Wood engraving by M. Moller, 1879.



the environs belonged to Paris, or at least to its map of urbanity. The city had need of it, and certainly its citizens believed they had. They wanted the difference between town and country spelt out as part of their lives. Cities ought to have an ending, an outside, an elsewhere one could reach, as if in doing so one gave the city back a lost identity. Paris was a set of constraints and formalities, and thus the opposite of nature; from a distance it all seemed clear—what the city had to offer and why one had to get away from it; the exile was momentary and the crowds came home at evening re-created.

My tone has slipped too close to Ajalbert's. Irony at the expense of the new re-creation myth is prone to explode in the user's face, for the truth is that it proved entirely possible to imagine Argenteuil was the countryside. It was all the countryside one needed; nature was made up essentially of vendanges and regattas, and art lent support to the felicitous equation. If we put side by side two typical images from the 1870s, Roland Debreux's *Vendanges à Argenteuil* of 1875 and Paul Renonard's *Régates d'automne* (also at Argenteuil) of 1879, we have the elements of the myth displayed and can appreciate its resilience. Such pictures in their innocence are foils to Impressionist painting; they help one understand why Manet's *Argenteuil* was unpopular, and perhaps why Monet's was not.

In this limited sense Manet may be said to belong to the ironists' camp. His picture is a kind of proof that what they have to say is potentially serious and ought to be included in a representation of the new class. Let me try to strip their case of its facetiousness and state it for the last time.



97. Alfred Grévin, *Aux champs*. Wood engraving
in *Le Journal Amusant*,
7 August 1875.

and even here one's protest is not moral—not a request to the writers to be serious for once—but, rather, a suspicion that the tone reinstates the distinctions it claims to put in question. At one level the writers seem to be saying that town and country are hopelessly confused, and that this has to do with a blurring at the edges of the bourgeoisie. But the way that they say it enables them to insinuate, on no very good grounds, that somewhere the confusion stops and a real countryside remains, perhaps even a real bourgeoisie. They are constantly making fun of both concepts, and as constantly dependent on them for their comedy.

"Y," you will remember, admitted being bored with nature, but that was because he had actually had it: he had been in his village a full six days and could afford to escape to Paris on the seventh. Paris too belonged to him; he was a bourgeois, not a commercial traveller; he was one of "les riches," in a caricature by Alfred Grévin from 1875, where a peasant wife attempts to moderate her man's *resentiment de classe*. "The rich!" she says, as the ladies and gentlemen walk past the potato field: "You'd never know it to look at them, but they work as hard as we do, my poor Baptiste—doing nothing, that's their job." They still existed, these fabulous creatures, and were not to be confused with their inferiors.

No doubt this landscape and its inhabitants would be difficult to portray in any other way than ironically, and the caricature is quite good about the reasons why. (It needs only a factory chimney or two—over Baptiste's left shoulder, perhaps—to satisfy the keenest wish for a comprehensive statement on the matter.) And yet serious depictions of it do exist: Manet's *Argenteuil, les canotiers* for one, and Seurat's *Une Baignade à Asnières* (Plate XIII). Describing the landscape, these pictures suggest, depends on the painter's not avoiding the contact of industry and nature, and trying to show how the one term inflects the other. But that in turn depends on describing how people behave in these new circumstances. A painting which did so would not lack comedy: it would inevitably have to do with the absurdities involved in performing idleness or not being used to it; but the painting would pre-eminently give form—at the risk of appearing a trifle stiff, a trifle wooden—to the dialectic within distraction: the play of ease and unease, restraint and spontaneity, pleasure and ennui, nature and artifice, fashion and recreation. It would try to make these moments articulate, and conceive them as part of the wider business of laying claim to bourgeoisie.

In Seurat's *Baignade*, for example, there are plenty of things to suggest that the idyll is awkward as well as dignified: the sheer unlikely neatness of the bathers' clothes, to start with, the boots and bowlers and concentric straw hats; the dim profile of the central boy (the "lout," as my mother insisted on calling him); the careful outlines of figures and grass; the doll's-

They do not believe that the city has limits any more, and in particular they doubt it ends at Argenteuil and Asnières. The countryside provided there is false (if a true one still exists—and some of them are sceptical—it will be inaccessible to outings). The signs of its falsity are, first, the little Parisians themselves and their irredeemably urban manners and, second, the presence of industry in the landscape. It is especially this last that indicates what is bound to happen next: the factories will come out across the Plaine de Gennevilliers from Clichy, and Argenteuil will have no more *tendances* and regattas.

What one objects to in the ironists is not their diagnosis but their tone;

98. Nicolas Poussin, *Moïse sauvé des eaux*, 1638.

house trees, the smokestacks and gasworks, the frantic rower going off frame. We would not need to know the unpleasant facts about the great collector sewer to realize that this was an unfashionable place to swim. The figures appear to be floating freely, self-absorbed and separate, each perfect in its artless way, sharp-edged and individual. They would not be here except for the landscape, by which is meant the factories as well as the river, the sewer as well as the grass. So the landscape has to be painted in a way which agrees with the figures: it has to be awkward and hieratic like them, but also lifelike and composed. The piles of clothes are put against the glittering water, smoke against sunlight, bland against pungent colours, the lout on the bank alongside the ephebe in the water shouting to the other shore.

I believe that Seurat's most important source for *Une Baignade à Asnières* was Poussin's *Moïse sauvé des eaux*, in the Louvre. It seems to lie behind some of the picture's details—the flat-bottomed boat on its way across the river, the backdrop of architecture, the tree put in place of the pyramid—and to be echoed in its overall format. Presumably the source was meant to be somewhat appropriate as well as queer, as if the painter was arguing that there was order and calm at Asnières, and even the faint possibility a miracle might happen. There might be a Moses in the bullrushes yet, about to lead his people back from exile in the *banlieue*!

This chapter and the next are essentially studies in the emergence of the lower-middle class. That phenomenon seems to me one of the main circumstances of modernist art, though the connection between one thing and the other is by no means direct. Modernist art is characterized, indeed, by its desire to take its distance from the petite bourgeoisie and the world of entertainments it ushered in, but artists were paradoxically fascinated by those entertainments and made them the new art's central subject for a considerable time. It has sometimes seemed an intractable problem, this. Not so much that leisure and pleasure were chosen to be painted in the first place—their visual appeal is sufficiently obvious—but that they survived as the new art's favourite theme and underwent such a potent series of transformations: in the work of Seurat and his anarchizing followers; in the art of Toulouse-Lautrec and the Nabis; in Matisse's depictions of *Luxe, calme et volupté* or *Bonheur de vivre*, in the pictures of the other Fauves; within Cubism, even, in the images of *Aficionados* and *The Cardiff Team*; in the long procession of harlequins and picnickers, music halls and *jours de fête*, undressed natives and Englishmen in Moscow.

Historians talk about the rise of leisure in the later nineteenth century,

by which they mean mainly its crystallization out from the rhythms and caesuras of work.⁵⁴ Something had certainly happened; leisure had become a mass phenomenon, a separately capitalized sector of social life in which great profits were to be had. Recreation took on increasingly spectacular forms: the park, the resort, the day at the river or the races, the café-concert, the football league, the Tour de France, and finally the Olympic Games. These various subcultures of leisure make more sense, I think, if they are put in relation to the history I sketched in chapter one. From at least the start of the 1860s there was felt to be some kind of threat to the moral economy of bourgeois society—the fine fabric of Parisian neighbourhood trades and manufacture, the face-to-face, small-scale, master-and-man society of the metropolis in the earlier part of the century. Haussmannization was resisted as the visible form of that threat; it was held responsible for the dark deeds of the Pereire brothers and the owners of department stores.

The subcultures of leisure and their representations are part of Haussmannization understood in this light, part of a process of spectacular reorganization of the city which was in turn a reworking of the whole field of commodity production. Their role in the process was by no means

trivial. It was not just that they were one main form in which everyday life was colonized in the later nineteenth century—given over to experts, addicts, entrepreneurs, consumers—but that there was such active disagreement over who had the right to plant the flag in the new territory. The colonies were claimed by various uneasy fractions of the middle class; by those who wished to reaffirm a status which had previously been made in the world of work, but seemed no longer to be available there; and by those who believed they had a right to the same status, even if their conditions of employment still seemed menial in many ways. The world of leisure was thus a great symbolic field in which the battle for bourgeois identity was fought; the essential warring claims were to forms of freedom, accomplishment, naturalness, and individuality which were believed to be the keys to bourgeoisie; actions both rearguard and offensive were mounted, disinformation was much in evidence.

Leisure was a performance, Weblen said, and the thing performed was class; though what is interesting about the acting in the 1870s, say, is its relative incompetence, as in *Argenteuil, les canotiers*.

I think this implication of leisure in class struggle goes some way to explain the series of transformations undergone by the subject in painting from 1860 to 1914. In particular it seems to me to shed light on the painters' changes of mind about how leisure should be depicted: the way, for example, styles of spontaneity are repeatedly displaced by styles of analysis—grandly individualistic modes of handling, that is, abandoned in favour of ones claiming to be anonymous, scientific and even collective. The classic instance is Neo-Impressionism: I do not believe that its vehemence (or its appeal to Pissarro) can be understood unless it is seen as deriving from an altered view of leisure, and of art as part of that leisure—which in turn derived from a new set of class allegiances. But just as interesting is the speed with which the Fauvist style—which had appeared for a moment to open nature again to the free play of fantasy—collapsed into its Cubist opposite. By the time of Fauvism, one could say, the myth of recreation could be stated only in overtly mythical terms: the dream of freedom and self-consciousness, of crepuscular boating and *Bonheur de vivre*, is adjourned to the golden age.

The reader should be warned, finally, that the notion of the “nouvelles couches sociales” being involved in any great revision of class society—any wholesale change in social structure—is controversial. Gambetta, for one, repudiated it. “I said *nouvelles couches not classes*,” he said somewhat ruefully in a speech at Auxerre in 1874; “that last is a bad word I never use.”⁵⁵

A BAR AT THE FOLIES-BERGÈRE

*A Mabille, entre deux figures
Un jeune homm' qui s'disait Baron,
M'offre un hôtel et deux voitures
Pour y faire briller mon bon ton.
En baissant les yeux je m'approche,
Mais en voilà bien du nouveau,
J'veus des ciseaux sortant d'sa poche. . . .
L'Baron n'était qu'un calicot. . . .*

—Café-concert song, 1867.¹

The Argument

That the adjective “popular,” applied to persons, manners, or entertainment in the later nineteenth century, came to mean too many, too indefinite things. The word’s elusiveness derived from its being used for ideological purposes, to suggest kinds of identity and contact between the classes—ways they belonged together and had interests in common—which did not exist in their everyday life or organized social practice, but seemed to in the spectacle. There was a sense in which the “nouvelles couches sociales” were nothing in our period, or very little, without the place allotted to them in “popular culture”—which is not to say that they lacked a determinate economic position, only that it was not yet clear, to them or anyone, what it was. Popular culture provided the petit-bourgeois aficionado with two forms of illusory “class”: an identity with those below him, or at least with certain images of their life, and a difference from them which hinged on his skill—his privileged place—as consumer of those same images. Painting was mostly a complaisant spectator of this spectacle, perfecting the petit bourgeois’s view of things and leaving behind the best picture we have of what it amounted to. But there are certain canvases which suggest the unease and duplicity involved in this attaining to a new class; something of the kind is claimed in this chapter for Manet’s last painting, *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère* (Plate XXIV).²